RESPONSIBILITY AND OBLIGATION IN THE ETHICS OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR AND KARL BARTH

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ABSTRACT

Niebuhr distinguishes Responsibility as a conceptual scheme for the understanding of morality from Obligation. He is concerned to show that morality is not fundamentally a matter of response to an ought. Human conduct is viewed as determined more by an interpretation of what is happening than by laws, commands, etc. All morality derives from an interpretation of the ultimate conditions of one's existence, which Niebuhr identifies with faith. There is then for Niebuhr a coincidence between faith and morals. This coincidence means that one's conduct follows from his fundamental outlook, his trust or distrust of the universal context of his actions. Fitting conduct derives from trust, unfitting conduct from distrust. Moral choices are themselves responses of faith or faithlessness.

Barth's conscious choice of Obligation as the conceptual scheme most suitable for Christian ethics is dictated by his concern for the sovereignty of God. The idea of command expresses the view that our decision is subject to the sovereign decision of God. Barth acknowledges that obligation is not entirely appropriate to divine sovereignty, since it implies a resistance to the divine will, a doing only of what one is obliged to do rather than a whole-hearted, joyful correspondence to the divine will. Mere compliance implied in obligation leaves an aspect of the self outside the influence of the divine will. Furthermore, obligation is difficult to combine with human freedom. It implies that the more obligation the less freedom, whereas Christians want to claim that correspondence to the divine will and human freedom coincide with each other.

The interest in the sovereignty of God does not succeed in justifying the concept of obligation, but it nevertheless has significant implications for Niebuhr's view of ethics. As long as Niebuhr attempts to show the coincidence between faith and morals by defining faith in terms of moral reason he has trouble maintaining the sovereignty of God. Christian faith is misrepresented by making it appear that faith in God is for the sake of providing direction and meaning for human existence. A more adequate view of the coincidence between faith and morals is open to Niebuhr. According to it, all morals derive from an interpretation of the ultimate context of one's conduct. The continuity is not between faith in God and faith is some other object, resting upon the fact that they both fulfill some function in human existence. It rests upon the fact that trust and distrust are both responses to what is objectively one reality, though understood differently.

Barth is also concerned to assert a coincidence between faith and morals. This is an implication of his doctrine that the law is the form of the gospel. The law is properly known only in faith. Knowledge of the law and obedience necessarily coincide, since faith is not a mere hearing but also a doing of the Word. The concept of obligation, however, is inconsistent with this view. It implies that one is aware of the command and then must decide whether to obey. The problem is that disobedience implies knowledge, which Barth says is present only to faith. It would seem then that it is possible for disobedience to follow from faith, which is contrary to Barth's understanding.

The merit of Responsibility is that it is able to overcome the difficulties of obligation. It represents conceptually the coincidence between faith and morals which Barth asserts but which obligation contradicts. Further, it succeeds in showing a coincidence between authority and freedom in a way which is impossible, given the definition of freedom presupposed by Obligation.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis proposes to investigate a problem in the methodology of theological ethics. The issue is one suggested by H. Richard Niebuhr's inquiry into the significance of conceptual form for moral theory in his posthumous work The Responsible Self.[1] There Niebuhr notices, as others before him have, that moral theories can be classified according to their form as well as their content. Such analysis has resulted in a typology consisting of teleological theories, which regard morality as seeking to realize an end or an ideal, and deontological theories, which think of morality as a matter of obligation or of obedience to a law. Niebuhr is not satisfied that either of these traditional schemes is entirely suitable to the phenomena of morals, and he proposes a third one which he calls responsibility. Our intention is to examine the analysis of morality made in terms of responsibility with the specific question in mind whether it offers a better conceptual scheme for the Christian understanding of morals.

We have chosen to compare Niebuhr's theory of responsibility extensively with one of the alternative schemes in his typology. For this purpose Karl Barth's ethics is taken as an instance of the deontological type. Niebuhr thinks that Barth is a good example of one whose ethics is uncritical about the fundamental conceptual form which he employs.

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, The Responsible Self (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

Does the examination of Barth's ethics disclose the difficulties that Niebuhr ascribes to the deontological mode of thought? If so, how does responsibility surmount them? Barth's ethics is not chosen simply as a foil for Niebuhr's theory, however. We do not intend that Niebuhr should ask all the questions without giving Barth a chance to cross-examine. Unlike Niebuhr, we do not assume that Barth's choice of obligation is uncritical. On the contrary, we assume that Barth's prominence in contemporary theology derives in large part from the attention which he has devoted to the questions of theological method, and this in ethics no less than in other aspects of theology. We will attempt then to understand the reasons for Barth's use of the concept of obligation, and we will attempt to see how Niebuhr's procedure stands up as measured by Barth's criteria, no less than the other way around.

Barth makes a nice test for Niebuhr's theory in part because the theologies of the two are at points widely divergent. In many respects each has the other's way of doing theology, if not the man himself, in mind when he makes his own contrary decisions. One of the things that will concern us is how these theological differences are reflected in the problem of ethical method which is the focus of our attention. But we will try to show too that Niebuhr and Barth are not necessarily at opposite ends of the theological spectrum, even a spectrum taking into account only the issues which appear to divide them. In a sense then the dissertation aspires to a kind of reconciliation between the two men. It will take the form of trying to show that at the points where Niebuhr and Barth differ it is because each is concerned with a different problem. Neither, however, can afford to sacrifice what is the other's primary concern, nor does he want to. Our task will be to try to show that he need not. If the issues are divided at their natural joints, both Barth's and Niebuhr's central concerns can be held together. We will not try to smooth out the differences. We will argue, however, that the differences depend upon each man's insisting upon something which is not essential to his primary concern. The primary consideration affecting all of Barth's methodological decisions is the sovereignty of God. We will argue that it is this which dictates his choice of the category of obligation. Niebuhr's primary interest is in showing that there is an identity between the question of faith and moral decision. We will argue that this is the fundamental motive for the development of the scheme of responsibility. Neither Barth nor Niebuhr intends to deny what the other affirms. We will attempt to show that each has some difficulty in maintaining what is the primary interest of the other. That is what makes their mutual critiques valid and the attempt to reconcile them a worthwhile endeavor.

Since we have included Barth as a representative of deontological ethics, the question can be raised why no teleologist is included. In part the answer might be that the inquiry is undertaken primarily from a Protestant perspective, and the teleological view has been most characteristic of Catholic ethics. Niebuhr and Barth are agreed in their rejection of the teleological scheme, if not completely in their reasons for it. This is primarily the reason that no teleologist was included in the original plan of the dissertation. In the course of the inquiry, however, a kind of *ex post facto* justification for the exclusion seemed to present itself. Niebuhr's theory of responsibility is mainly concerned to show that morality is not fundamentally a matter of "ought." But the ideas of ought and of obligation are present not only in deontology but also in teleology. The difference is that in teleology they have a different basis, resting not merely upon the majesty and authority of the law itself but upon the fact that the law is the means to the good, to man's end. The distinction between deontology and teleology is one which has its basis in the fact that two conceptions of moral authority are involved. The theory of responsibility, however, is not fundamentally concerned with the issue of the nature and ground of moral authority. And its objections to morality conceived in terms of an ought apply whether the ought is categorical, as in deontology, or hypothetical, as in teleology. A separate treatment of the teleological position then is not only not necessary but in fact might be misleading, since it would direct our attention to the problem of the nature of moral authority, which we propose is not the main problem responsibility is concerned with. In other words, responsibility is directed toward a position which teleology and deontology have in common and not the one on which they divide.

In the course of treating the particular problem we have decided to focus upon, other questions in the methodology of Christian ethics will come into view. The primary of these is the relation of theological ethics to secular or philosophical ethics on the one hand and to dogmatics on the other. This question is taken up because both Barth and Niebuhr consider it to be directly relevant to the issue of the conceptual form of Christian ethics. From Niebuhr's point of view it is intimately connected with his concern to show an identity between the issues of faith and morality, and for Barth the question is important from the standpoint of a proper view of the divine sovereignty, which is also the basis of his reasoning in behalf of obligation. There are many related issues of ethical method, however, which this thesis does not attempt to consider. It in no way purports to be a comprehensive inquiry into the methodology of theological ethics as such. It restricts itself to one problem, entertaining other issues only as they develop out of the primary concern. Also the thesis makes no attempt to be a systematic account of the thought of either of the men considered. There is no exposition of the ethics of either man as a whole, nor is any effort made to follow the historical development of their theologies. Of course, responsibility must be assumed for not misrepresenting the thought of either man in its wider contexts.

The question of the most appropriate conceptual framework for Christian ethics is a rather technical methodological issue. As such it may be thought to be of somewhat less than crucial significance for the content of Christian morals. Is it not something which matters only for hairsplitting theologians who have to make a living? Certainly Niebuhr claims that it is not. In fact he seems to think that his proposal offers a way of cutting through a great deal of fruitless theological controversy. In his view too much theological effort is expended in trying to make adjustments within a relatively unsuitable conceptual scheme in order to make it somehow accord with the phenomena of the moral life. If he is right in suggesting that what is needed is not such minor adjustments but a whole new conceptual framework, then, far from being theological make-work, the theory of responsibility may offer a way of avoiding at least some of it. Niebuhr claims that the fundamental concepts of an ethical theory are not merely vehicles for communicating the content of the theory. The insight into moral reality itself depends in part upon the ideas with which that reality is grasped. If this is so, then what is at stake is not merely a measure of clarity and comprehensibility in moral theory and the possibility of avoiding unnecessary complications and conflicts--though these are by no means to be despised --but also the substance of morality itself. Implied in Niebuhr's claims for the theory of responsibility is the suggestion that the new wine of the gospels requires for its very existence new skins to hold it. Whether the Christian understanding of morals is actually suffering for lack of an appropriate thought-form is a question that will have to be decided after hearing Niebuhr out. But if he is right on the methodological issue it will be of consequence for the content of Christian understanding and not merely for its theoretical formulation.

CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF RESPONSIBILITY

Niebuhr proposes the theory of responsibility as a significantly new way of viewing morality. It is not the work of any one person but rather a collective achievement. Responsibility has come almost unrecognized into the common usage of our society. The process of development, however, can be helped along by making it explicit and by shaping this new mode of conceiving of the moral life into a consistent theory.[1] It is as an effort in this direction that Niebuhr considers his work. The task which we set for ourselves in this first chapter is that of gaining some understanding of what Niebuhr means by responsibility. The problem at the outset will not be to evaluate the truth of the theory or the validity of the approach. We want to know first what there is about responsibility which marks it off from other theories and makes it distinctive. We want to know also what in the older theories Niebuhr regards as deficient so that the taking up of a new line is a significant endeavor. Only after laying this groundwork will it be possible to move on to a detailed analysis of one of the positions which Niebuhr rejects in the light of his critique and ultimately to make some evaluation of Niebuhr's theory.

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[1] The category of responsibility is increasingly being recognized in theoretical treatments of morals as well as practical moral usage. Cf. Carl J. Friedrich (ed.), Nomos, Vol. III: Responsibility, Yearbook for the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy (New York: Atherton, 1960).

Niebuhr's consideration of the problem of the form of the moral life begins with a typology of historical forms.[1] Moral theories have traditionally consisted of two main kinds. There have been those which see life as a matter of striving after the goal of human existence. Among them there are many conceptions of what the goal is; aside from the content, they are agreed on the form that morality takes. Niebuhr believes that the common element derives from the fact that teleologists (as he calls this first type) at least implicitly conceive of morality as analogous to craftsmanship. The artificer, who constructs things according to a plan and for the sake of an end, is the symbol by means of which they represent to themselves the whole of man's practical existence. Beyond all the particular arts there is the master art which has as its end the actualization of the good man and the good society. The material of this art is human life itself.

> For the Greek philosopher and many who knowingly or unknowingly follow him, man is the being who makes himself—though he does not do so by himself—for the sake of a desired end. Two things in particular we say about ourselves: we act toward an end or are purposive; and, we act upon ourselves, we fashion ourselves, we give ourselves a form.[2]

There are others for whom morality is not to be viewed as a matter of pursuing the goal of ideal human existence. These men, who constitute the second great type of moral theory, view the whole of human practical existence as existence under law. Niebuhr calls them deontologists. For the teleologists laws are also important, but their significance lies in the fact that they are the rules which lead to the desired end.[1] The deontologist, on the other hand, does not subordinate law to the end. For him obedience to the law is good irrespective of the end which is achieved. The goodness of the end is itself defined by its being derived from the good law, rather than vice versa. The laws which various deontologists acknowledge may differ widely as to source and content. The designation, like teleology, is a formal one. What the deontologists share is a common image of human agency. Their symbol, Niebuhr says, is a political one; moral life is like citizenship in a commonwealth under law. When the teleologist entertains the question, "What shall I do?" he does so by raising what is for him the prior question, "What is the end which I seek?" The deontologist approaches decision by raising the question, "What is the law of my life?"

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[1] The classification of ethics into teleological and deontological types is, of course, not original with Niebuhr. Cf. C. D. Broad, Five Types of Ethical Theory (Paterson, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1959), pp. 206ff. As will appear in the text, however, Niebuhr connects this typology with a method of inquiry which sees these fundamental concepts as derivative from preconceptual symbols, images, or metaphors. In this respect Niebuhr explores the significance of symbolic forms for morals, and the work is related to that of Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (3 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) and Stephen Pepper, World Hypotheses (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

[2] The Responsible Self, p. 49.

Both teleology and deontology have been fruitful in providing for man a scheme by means of which to envision his life as agent. In each case, however, the fundamental symbol from which the concepts derive remains only a metaphor and not an exact copy of the reality which it represents. As a result the schemes themselves are only more or less adequate. When problems are encountered, it may be that the solution does not lie in further refinements within the scheme. The problem may simply be an indication of a point at which the fundamental symbol itself is inappropriate. Niebuhr proposes that the stresses and strains of the older symbols are giving rise to the new symbolism of responsibility and with it the possibility of a new concept of morality.

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 55.

The concept of responsibility has only recently come into currency as a moral term. In many instances the new word is used to denote the older concepts. Niebuhr claims, however, that the new term has as its basis a new symbol of moral existence, and as such it constitutes a new instrument of understanding. Such a new symbol is important not so much for refuting the old as for developing new insights which lie beyond the scope of the latter. At points where the older symbols are least fitting the new symbol of responsibility has the power of revealing important aspects of our practical existence.[1]

The idea of responsibility represents for Niebuhr an alternative or additional way of conceiving of our moral existence. In his analysis of the various components of the concept Niebuhr isolates four basic elements. Response differs in the first place from mere reaction. It is informed by an interpretation of that to which the response is made. Pure reflex actions such as knee jerks are not properly responses but reactions. A response is a reaction which is influenced by some understanding of that to which it is a reply, an understanding which interprets the action upon it as having meaning by seeing it within a larger context, i.e., as a part of a whole. It is response which makes an action one of a self and not simply that of a body, and hence only response is moral. Niebuhr begins his analysis of responsibility by calling attention to interpretation as that which distinguishes response from reaction. But then he speaks of the next element as being the third, implying that interpretation is second but without indicating what then is the first. We assume that if interpretation is the second component in the idea of responsibility, Niebuhr must be thinking of the first component as consisting of that which response has in common with reaction rather than that which differentiates the two.[1] We can only guess here, but perhaps the missing first element has to do with the fact that response, like reaction, is also a second action in which our action only follows something that happens to us. We are acted upon before we are actors. Later Niebuhr criticizes teleology from the standpoint of Christian ethics on the grounds that it places human rather than divine action in the focus as first action. (See below, pp. 19 and 20.) In any case, the third element in the idea of responsibility is accountability. Accountability occurs in deontology also, of course; but in responsibility it is defined differently. In the latter accountability appears as the anticipation of the response which our response will evoke.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 56-57.

> An agent's action is like a statement in a dialogue. Such a statement not only seeks to meet, as it were, or to fit into, the previous statement to which it is an answer, but is made in anticipation of reply. It looks forward as well as backward; it anticipates objections, confirmation, and corrections.[2]

An action is responsible not only when it is responsive to a prior action. To be responsible it has to be more than an isolated, atomic unit of behavior. It must be an event which is fitted within an interaction, which includes an after as well as a before. "Responsibility third, implying that interpretation is second but without indicating what then is the first. We assume that if interpretation is the second component in the idea of responsibility, Niebuhr must be thinking of the first component as consisting of that which response has in common with reaction rather than that which differentiates the two.[1] We can only guess here, but perhaps the missing first element has to do with the fact that response, like reaction, is also a second action in which our action only follows something that happens to us. We are acted upon before we are actors. Later Niebuhr criticizes teleology from the standpoint of Christian ethics on the grounds that it places human rather than divine action in the focus as first action. (See below, pp. 19 and 20.) In any case, the third element in the idea of responsibility is accountability. Accountability occurs in deontology also, of course; but in responsibility it is defined differently. In the latter accountability appears as the anticipation of the response which our response will evoke.

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[2] Ibid., p. 64.

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An action is responsible not only when it is responsive to a prior action. To be responsible it has to be more than an isolated, atomic unit of behavior. It must be an event which is fitted within an interaction, which includes an after as well as a before. "Responsibility lies in the agent who stays with his action, who accepts the consequences in the form of reactions and looks forward in a present deed to the continued interaction."[1] Niebuhr indicates the aspect of accountability by showing how the linear movement of response is forward as well as backward looking. An illustration he gives suggests that the scope of response should be viewed not only as a line but also as having breadth. Thus Niebuhr asks whether a responsible society will respond to a murderer through its courts and other agencies merely as an isolated person, or will it also respond to the society of which he is a member. Further, will it respond to the man simply as the doer of this deed, or will it take account also of the other dimensions of his existence as a self, prescribing perhaps not merely incarceration for his antisocial physical body but education and psychiatry.[2] The final constituent which Niebuhr isolates in the theory of responsibility is what he calls social solidarity. For there to be the possibility of response the self must be able to act in a continuing society. It must be able to have a relatively consistent interpretation of a scheme of things within which action takes place.

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[2] Ibid., p. 64.

> A series of responses to disconnected actions guided by disconnected interpretations would scarcely be the action of a self but only of a series of states of mind somehow connected with the same body--

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., pp. 64-65. We might attempt to understand what we have called the breadth of responsibility in Niebuhr by an illustration of our own. In the issue of birth control from the standpoint of responsibility presumably response would be made not only to one's marriage partner but to the rest of the family and to the society at large. Birth control would not be treated merely as a matter of sexual ethics. Factors like family means and the population of society would be equally relevant.

though the sameness of the body would be apparent only to an external point of view.[1]

The foregoing is an outline of the scheme of responsibility as Niebuhr himself gives it. As an outline it is somewhat bare, and for an understanding of the concept it must be regarded as preliminary. The further explication will need to pay attention to the arguments for the idea over against the historical counterparts to which Niebuhr regards it as alternative. These arguments, it seems to me, may be divided into two kinds, those of a rather ad hoc and illustrative type on the one hand and a more systematic argument on the other. We will turn now to some considerations of the first kind.

One of the primary assertions of the theory of responsibility is that our conduct is not always or even primarily determined by a conception of a law under which we must act or an ideal, the realization of which is our goal. Teleology approaches the question, "What shall I do?" by asking, "What is my goal, ideal, or telos?" Deontology asks: "What is the first law of my life?" Responsibility, however, emphasizes the importance of what is going on for answering the moral question.[2] The crucial nature of the interpretation can be seen best in situations of emergency and in personal suffering. In such situations ideals and laws no doubt play their part, but even more important for the decision which must be taken is the interpretation of what is happening. The decisions taken in America during the Civil War and during the depression following 1929 show the extent to which what the nation has become has stemmed "from response to challenge rather than from the pursuit of an ideal or from adherence to some ultimate laws."[1] In suffering it is evident that a person's interpretation of what is happening to him is more important for his decision than his goals or his obligations.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

> Because suffering is the exhibition of the presence in our existence of that which is not under our control, or the intrusion into our self-legislating existence of an activity operating under another law than ours, it cannot be brought adequately within the spheres of teleological and deontological ethics . . .[2]

Even in situations which are not considered emergencies or which do not involve personal suffering, one's interpretation of what is happening to him is often of more importance for decision than the pursuit of goals or the obedience to laws. In the case of labor-management relations, for example, goals are certainly important; but it may be that the interpretation that each side has of what the other is trying to do is more decisive than its own goals. The same is true in international relations. Russia and the United States confront each other not only with their own ends but also with their interpretation of what the other's intentions are.[3]

Niebuhr argues that the idea of the moral life as the responsible life can help us in understanding the biblical ethos, which for the most part has been regarded either deontologically or teleologically. The thinking of the Bible can, of course, be construed teleologically. When it is, the ideal of the vision of God, of eternal happiness, or of the kingdom of God, is set forth as the goal of human behavior. Biblical ethics can also be understood as obedience to the commands of God.

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[1] Ibid., p. 59.

[2] Ibid., p. 60.

[3] Ibid., p. 62.

But, according to Niebuhr, there is much in the biblical ethos which cannot be brought under these categories. We shall consider later the difficulties encountered by these interpretations, but first let us look at the manner in which Niebuhr makes use of the concept of responsibility in understanding some biblical material. The 10th chapter of Isaiah is taken by him as a paradigm of the ethics of responsibility. When Isaiah advises the people of Israel in face of an impending invasion by Assyria, he does not remind them of a law or of an ideal. He interprets to them the meaning of the events to which they must make a response, in order that their decision may be fitting. Isaiah counsels the people by proposing that they understand the event as an act in which God is punishing his wayward people rather than as an attack of the ungodly upon the godly.[1] If they see the event in the way that Isaiah explains it to them rather than in the way they are inclined to see it, their decision will be different. The same is true in the New Testament, according to Niebuhr. Jesus responds not to commands of God but to acts of God. He prays, "Not my will but thine be done," but the will of God does not mean the commands of God. It means rather what God is doing in all that nature and men do.[2] Jesus sees no less than other men that the sun shines equally upon the just and the unjust. Others have interpreted this as a sign for unbelief, as an indication that the universal order is without justice and unconcerned with the right and wrong of human conduct. Jesus, however, interprets the phenomenon in a different way. Rather than being a sign of the amorality of the cosmic order, it is a sign of its generosity. Those men who have been cast out by their fellows are not so cast out by the infinite Lord. It is a sign that God's righteousness is not the same as man's righteousness, not because it falls below but because it rises far above it.[1] And Jesus responds differently from other men not because he is acting under a different law, or even because he obeys and they do not, but because he is responding to reality which is interpreted differently by him.

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[1] _Ibid._, p. 67. Cf. also pp. 168f.

[2] _Ibid._, p. 164.

From Niebuhr's point of view the interpretation of the biblical ethos according to deontological or teleological schemes, although neither is entirely beside the point, runs into difficulties. Each is able to include much, but there is also much that must be omitted.

> For Barth and Bultmann alike in our times, not to speak of most interpreters of the Old Testament, the ethics of the Bible, and Christian ethics too, is the ethics of obedience. How to interpret Christian freedom and what to make of eschatology within this framework has taxed the ingenuity of the interpreters severely. Bultmann has transformed eschatology into existentialism in order to maintain an ethics of radical obedience; Barth has had to transform the law into a form of the gospel and the commandment into permission in order to reconcile the peculiarity of gospel ethos with deontological thinking.[2]

The statements that Niebuhr makes here are so sketchy as to be of little value as a critique of the view in question. At most they can provide us with a hint as to what moves him to develop his alternative. The charge that deontology cannot deal adequately with biblical eschatology is perplexing. Niebuhr says that the deontologist criticizes the teleologist for assuming a kind of control over the future. (Cf. below, p. 18.) The implication seems to be that the deontologist, since he does not think only in terms of the telos, can take proper account of the finis or the eschaton which puts an end to all man's ends. Later Niebuhr says that "the future-directed movement in human life is more eschatological than purely teleological,"[1] implying again that it is teleology rather than deontology which does not take proper account of biblical eschatology.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 166f.

[2] Ibid., p. 66.

The charge that the peculiar problem of deontological ethics is that of reconciling the law with the gospel seems to be more cogent. As Niebuhr states it, the problem of law and gospel is:

> to reconcile the requirement of the law to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and the neighbor as oneself, with the spontaneity, the unrequired character, of genuine love. To love in obedience to requirement is not to love at all; yet it is required that one love unrequiredly.[2]

There is the related problem consisting in the fact that the action of the redeemed, just because it is redeemed, should be done in freedom, i.e., the doing of one's own will; and yet if it is considered as obedience this must mean the subjugation of one's own will to that of another, namely, God. Niebuhr suggests that it is in wrestling with these dilemmas that Barth is driven to the extremity of turning the idea of command into that of permission.[3] Without going into the matter, Niebuhr also adduces "the logical dilemmas encountered in theological theories of atonement that operate with the symbolism of laws and courts" as evidence against deontological modes of thinking.[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 136.

[2] Ibid., pp. 130-31.

[3] Ibid., p. 131.

[4] Ibid.

Niebuhr suggests that the indictment of the teleological scheme is made by the deontologists. They point out that the model of craftsmanship, on the basis of which the moral life is construed as the striving for an end in accordance with an ideal, is inappropriate. Whereas in craftsmanship both the end and the means are relatively under our control, in dealing with our lives as a whole the same is not true. The material of the moral life, our body, impulses, etc., are given and not of our own choosing. Nor is the future at our disposal so that we can plan our lives toward a desired end.

> Neither the material then with which we work nor the future building is under our control when the work is directed toward ourselves. This life of ours is like politics more than like art, and politics is the art of the possible. What is possible to us in the situation in which we find ourselves? That we should rule ourselves as being ruled, and not much more.[1]

Niebuhr offers this argument as one which the deontologist makes against the teleologist. It seems more likely that we should regard it as one which Niebuhr himself makes from the standpoint of responsibility. In any case, it is not the argument Kant, whom Niebuhr takes to be the archetype of the deontological method,[2] makes against teleological ethics. Kant's argument seems rather to be that if an end is the determining ground of action it is so by being an object of desire. But to act from desire is to act according to a principle of self-love, which, far from being the basis of morality, must be considered its contrary if not its contradictory.[3]

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[1] _Ibid._, p. 52.

[2] _Ibid._, p. 91.

[3] Immanuel Kant, _Critique of Practical Reason_, trans. Lewis Beck White (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1956), pp. 19-20.

Niebuhr says that the problem of law and gospel is not prominent in teleological thought. The latter has a difficulty all its own, called by Niebuhr the "paradox of the vision and the image."

> On the one hand the great goal of life is God—God seen, God known, God loved. On the other hand it is the perfection of the seer, the knower, the lover. Thomas Aquinas maintains that it does not make a significant difference whether we speak first of the perfection of the self or first of the objective reality toward which the perfect self is directed in its activity. But in practice it does make a great difference whether the end is defined as the subjective good or the objective, whether as residing in the self or in the not-self, whether as love or the loved object. The strictures developed by critics of all self-conscious pursuers of perfection, whether these be monks and nuns or Protestant third orders, are germane and important. So it does make a difference whether I seek to be a loving self or seek my neighbor; whether my goal is to be a good man, or whether it is a good that lies beyond me as my object, for instance, justice in my society; whether I want to be religious or want to see God.[1]

Niebuhr objects to the fact that a subjective state of the self is regarded as interchangeable with the objective good. Even if perfection of the self is given with the vision of God, the former cannot equally well be regarded as the end, since then the attention is directed not toward God but toward the self. Niebuhr bases his judgment upon the practical consequences of the interchange. It could be argued, however, that the practical problem is one which has its basis in a matter of principle, i.e., the principle that is the basis of Kant's criticism of teleology, that to regard an end of the self as the basis of morality is to found it upon a principle of self-seeking. The practical difficulty then, for example in monasticism—the inversion upon oneself—would not be merely the way things happen to turn out in fact, but the consequence of being wrong in principle. A related charge Niebuhr makes against teleological theory is one we have already mentioned. It directs attention to the human pursuit of the good in a manner that is difficult to reconcile with the Christian concern with the primacy of God's action.[1]

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 134.

The arguments considered thus far have been somewhat ad hoc and illustrative rather than systematic and sustained. The primary argument for responsibility as the form of the moral life consists in a theory of the self. Perhaps it is better to say that the theory of responsibility is itself a theory of the self. And Niebuhr seems to hold that the other moral schemes are also theories of selfhood. Teleological theory says that man is what he is just insofar as he is purposive, striving toward goals and realizing ideals. Selfhood, according to this view, is rational being, existing in relation to ideas which it strives to actualize in existence.[2] From the standpoint of deontological theory the self exists in relation to a law or laws. The peculiarity of human existence is that it is capable of apprehending and obeying a moral law. The alternative view of the moral life as responsible rests upon a different idea about what it is to be human, or as Niebuhr most frequently says, what it is to be a self. The Responsible Self is not only a theory about what it takes to be responsible in the normative sense. It is at bottom a theory about what is involved in being a self at all.

The cornerstone of the theory of the self as responsible is Niebuhr's conviction of the social character of all human life. The relation most determinative of human selfhood is that to other selves. In teleology human existence is conceived of primarily in relation to ideals and ends. "In this situation I acknowledge a relation to other rational beings but my connection with them is a function of my relation to the objects of reason."[1] Likewise in deontological theory the relation of the self to other selves is secondary. "Thus man lives as moral self in the presence of law first of all, not of other selves."[2] In contrast to the subordinate role of other selves in teleology and deontology, responsibility places the social character of human selfhood in the foreground. What this means is that morality consists primarily in the relation of self to other selves rather than to ideals and ends or laws and principles. The theory proposed is that only in society, in response to other selves, is selfhood, and hence morality, possible.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 134-35.

[2] Ibid., p. 69.

> To be able to say that I am I is not an inference from the statement that I think thoughts nor from the statement that I have a law-acknowledging conscience. It is rather, the acknowledgment of my existence as the counterpart of another self. . . . The self is fundamentally social, in this sense that it is a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as a self only in that relation.[3]

Niebuhr cites the work of G. H. Mead and other social psychologists as developing this line of reflection.[4] Many people have noticed that not only is self a reflexive word but it also points to a reflexive reality. A self is a being which is an object to itself, something that cannot be said of bodies or even of minds simply as minds. But Niebuhr says, following Mead, that the possibility of being an object to oneself takes place only through dialogue with others.

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[1] Ibid., p. 70.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 71.

[4] G. H. Mead, The Philosophy of the Present (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1932).

> To be a being that is an object to itself is possible genetically and actually only as I take toward myself the attitude of other selves, see myself as seen, hear myself as heard, speak to myself as spoken to.[1]

It might be possible to conceive of an isolated self, but it would be isolated only in a physical sense. A solitary self could exist as a self only in the presence of remembered or expected others present to its mind in memory or imagination.[2]

The process in which the self makes itself its own object by taking the standpoint of other selves toward itself has long been spoken of in discussions of conscience. Conscience refers to that process whereby man not only makes himself his own object but judges his own behavior. Kant noted that it is possible for a man to judge himself only by assuming the standpoint of another toward himself.

> Now this original intellectual and moral capacity, called conscience, has this peculiarity in it, that although its business is a business of man with himself, yet he finds himself compelled by his reason to transact it *as if* at the command of another person.[3]

Niebuhr argues that Kant's analysis of the conscience does not go far enough. Conscience is not merely *like* being judged by another; it is in fact being judged by another since the self judges itself according to the approvals and disapprovals of its society. Niebuhr accepts what he calls the social theory of conscience, which he says has had a long history from Hume and Adam Smith through Freud and Westermarck.[4] That does not mean, however, that he accepts it quite on the terms that it has been proposed. The apparent reductionism of such explanations is attributed by Niebuhr to the fact that the men who have developed the theories have been uncritical about the society in which the self reflects upon its own deeds.[1] To accept that the self judges itself with the judgment of its society does not put the individual at the mercy of the immediately present group. Whether or not a social theory of conscience will be reductionistic depends upon how one defines the society in which the self responds. Christian ethics can accept the explanation that the voice of conscience is the voice of society so long as that society includes Jesus Christ and the Father to whom he makes response. The first point then in the theory of responsibility as the form of the moral life is that selfhood is essentially social and that responsibility alone of the theories under consideration makes that absolutely central to its scheme.

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[1] *The Responsible Self*, p. 72.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] Quoted by Niebuhr, *ibid*., p. 74, from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, ed. and trans. T. K. Abbott (London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 6th ed., 1927), pp. 321f. "As if" italicized by H. R. N.

[4] *Ibid*. Cf. also H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," *Journal of Philosophy*, XLII (1945), pp. 352-59.

The understanding of the self as responsible makes primary not only the social nature of the self but also its temporality and historicity. As in the case of the argument from society, Niebuhr is not merely saying that the self happens to be in time. Time is not an accidental condition of existence. To be temporal is part of what it means to be a self. And the self is historical and temporal in ways which teleology and deontology do not acknowledge. The teleologist depends upon a future for the actualization of his ends, but the past and the present receive little reference.[2] In deontological ethics time seems to be even less crucial. Man exists simply in the presence of a supertemporal law which is valid for his reason as a pure, nontemporal reason.[1] The historical self which responsibility is concerned about is temporal not merely in the sense that its life is lived out in a succession of moments which are related to each other as before and after and which can be measured by clocks and calendars. The self lives in a present which is not merely a point between the not-yet and the no-longer. The past and the future inform this personal present. They are the still-present and the already-present.[2] The self does not leave its past behind. Present experience is in part constituted by an interpretive apparatus which the self brings with it from the past. Present responses are guided by memories which serve as a priori patterns giving structure to the present. In part these memories are common to the society, like the language with which the self labels, distinguishes, and otherwise makes sense out of the present. In part the memories are private and include attitudes of trust and joy or of suspicion and guilt accumulated in the past which continue to attach to present encounters. The past then is not simply what is left behind. It is not left because the self is not only in time but is itself "time-full." The self carries its past with it. It remains and conditions the present, helping to make the present experience by determining what the self can know and how it can respond.

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 76.

[2] Ibid., p. 91.

The future too is not merely the not-yet. It is already present, in part determining what the present is. It is present in expectation and anticipation, in hopes and in fears. The significance of this future, the critical future which is already affecting the present, is far greater than is commonly recognized in thinking about ethics. For example, Niebuhr says that the difference between the spiritual idealist and the Epicurean may lie more in their different expectations than in the fact that one tends to the soul and the other to pleasure and pain.[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 92.

[2] Ibid., p. 93.

There is an interconnection between the temporal and the social. The existence of the self in time is always an existence in encounter with that which is not the self and which challenges the self, requiring of it a response. "To be in the present is to be in compresence with what is not myself."[2] If one abstracts from the existence of any other over against the self, for example as in mystic absorption, then there is no experience of the present. Conversely, Niebuhr suggests that the keenest experience of the present exists as a result of our being confronted with the presence of another which is not ourself and which presents itself in a threatening or promising form, calling for a response from us.[3] It is the same with the past and the future. The past which the self carries with it as memory "is a past of responses to other beings and of actions upon them in expectation of their reactions."[4] And the future is a future of impending questions addressed to me from others and requiring answers and a future of dreaded or hoped for responses from my companions to my actions.[5]

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[1] Ibid., p. 91.

[2] Ibid., p. 94.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 95.

[5] Ibid.

Point number two then in Niebuhr's theory of responsibility is that selfhood is temporal and historical and responsibility alone takes this aspect of existence seriously, in the sense that it appears in the scheme as an essential and not merely an incidental consideration.

There is a third characteristic of human selfhood understood as responsible. The self, Niebuhr suggests, is not only social and temporal; it is also radically contingent. "The self which knows itself in encounter with others, finds itself to be absolutely dependent in its existence, completely contingent, inexplicably present in its here-ness and now-ness."[1] The fact that I am cannot be accounted for by means of the explanation which we use to explain why we are thus and so. Many thinkers have called attention to the mystery which is left over after all our scientific explanations of why things are as they are, namely why there is anything at all rather than nothing. Niebuhr quotes Santayana:

> We say conventionally that the future is uncertain: but if we withdrew honestly into ourselves and examined our actual moral resources, we should feel that what is insecure is not merely the course of particular events but the vital presumption that there is a future coming at all, and a future pleasantly continuing our habitual experience. We rely in this, as we must, on the analogies of experience, or rather on the clockwork of instinct and presumption in our bodies; but existence is a miracle, and morally considered, a free gift from moment to moment. That it will always be analogous to itself is the very question we are begging.[2]

All finite existence is radically contingent in the sense described. But Niebuhr points also to the peculiar way in which selves are dependent upon that which is beyond their control. Just as remarkable as the fact that I am is the fact that I am. The self, although it is perhaps inseparable from its body, its mind, and its emotions, cannot simply be identified with any of these or all of them together.

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[1] Ibid., p. 109.

[2] Ibid., p. 113. Quoted from George Santayana, "Ultimate Religion," Obiter Scripta, ed. J. Buchler and B. Schwartz (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), pp. 283f.

> There is no way of moving from the impersonal statements that thinking is going on, or that living is in process, or that feeling occurs, to the conclusion that therefore I am. Only if I posit the self can I refer this thinking, living, feeling, to myself.[1]

The fact that the power by which I am is not in my own hands nor can it be identified with any of the finite powers which act upon me leads Niebuhr to speak of the "radical act" which is the source of being and of my being myself. Along with all the other beings to which the self must respond there is also this radical power to which response must be made.

The response to the radical power upon which it is absolutely dependent is constitutive of the self no less than responsibility in society and time. Sociologists tell us that a person plays many roles in his relations to various groups, and the psychologists speak of a process of self-identification through which persons distinguish themselves over against the not-self. Some unity of self is achieved in the role which the person assumes as citizen, educator, scientist, parent, churchman, etc. And some self-identity is possible as the self distinguishes itself from nature and from various social entities. But, according to Niebuhr, the unity and identity of the self is not adequately accounted for so long as one speaks only of multiple roles which the self assumes and various constancies from which it distinguishes itself. A partial unity and identity may thus be explained, but one is still left with the question of the one self in its many roles and one identity in face of the various others from which it distinguishes itself. This unity and identity, Niebuhr says, is possible only in response to a unity over against the self.

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 110.

> The self as one self among all the systematized reactions in which it engages seems to be the counterpart of a unity that lies beyond, yet expresses itself in, all the manifold systems of actions upon it. In religious language, the soul and God belong together; or otherwise stated, I am one within myself as I encounter the One in all that acts upon me.[1]

At this point the question may arise whether Niebuhr is any longer arguing for responsibility as the form of the moral life. The discussion, which began as a consideration of responsibility as an alternative to deontology and teleology, now appears to involve an argument for the existence of God. Whatever we think of the validity of the argument, the question is what does it have to do with responsibility as the form of the moral life.

We must look for the significance of the present argument in its parallel to the previous one from the nature of the self as social and temporal. There the proposal was that the self is social and temporal in ways that teleology and deontology do not take into account. The argument for the self as absolutely dependent is one of the same kind. It holds that the self is absolutely contingent and that the scheme of the moral life ought to exemplify this contingency in more than an incidental way. Responsibility does this by showing that the possibility of selfhood is not self-explanatory, and that it only exists insofar as there is a unity and identity which lies outside the self and in response to which the self achieves whatever unity and identity it has. There is then a parallel between the argument from contingency and those from the social and temporal nature of the self. Contingency is a characteristic of selfhood which a moral theory must include. In the theory of responsibility it is one of the fundamental premises, whereas in the alternative views it seems to have very little place.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

The reason that the outline of the argument is not so clear in the case of contingency as it was in the sections on society and time is that there is a second aspect which tends to obscure the first. This second aspect, yet to be defined, also occurs in conjunction with the previous arguments; but there it is somewhat easier to isolate, and consequently we have been able to reserve mention of it until now. We saw that Niebuhr holds that the self does not exist—could not come into existence as a self—isolated from other selves. Part of what we mean by a self is a being which can make itself its own object and can judge its conduct from an impartial standpoint. The capacity for self-transcendence, Niebuhr says, is a function of the self's existence in society. It judges itself by assuming the standpoint of the group. This much of the argument we have considered, but Niebuhr carries it a step further. The societies in which the self exists are no more self-contained than the individual. Each of them is "self-transcending" in the same way that the individual is. It depends upon something beyond itself for its own identity. To illustrate the point Niebuhr says that the existence of the self as patriot depends upon the nation or country. But the existence of the nation is not self-explanatory; that is, it does not consist merely of the immediately associated individual members. In the first place, the nation has its identity by reference to its heroes of the past—its Washingtons, Jeffersons, Madisons, Lincolns, etc.—who are the representatives of the community. The immediate community refers beyond itself to a more inclusive community for its identity in the same way that the self refers beyond itself to the society. And this process does not stop here.

> But now the transcendent reference group--these founding fathers, for instance, encountered in memory and these representatives of the community in a latter time encountered in anticipation--refer beyond themselves.[1]

The fathers of the nation represent not only the community but also what the nation stands for. In the case of the United States the representatives refer beyond themselves to the cause of democracy and ultimately to a universal human community and to "Nature and Nature's God."[2]

> It is not my intention to contend here for the validity of a new form of the moral argument for God. I only register this observation, that these social theories of the moral life as responsible are neither just to the empirical facts nor consistent with their fundamental idea if they stop such analysis at the point of reference to the ethos, or the judging actions of a closed society to which a man responds in all his responses to his companions. . . . The societies that judge or in which we judge ourselves are self-transcending societies. And the process of self-transcendence or reference to the third beyond each third does not come to rest until the total community of being has been involved.[3]

This so-called "movement toward the universal" is what we have called the second aspect of Niebuhr's argument, which in the case of the treatment of contingency tends to obscure the parallel with the earlier arguments. If we accept as bona fide Niebuhr's disclaimer of an attempt to prove the existence of God, we are still left with the task of explaining what place this second aspect has in the argument for responsibility as the form of the moral life. We propose an answer to this question along the following lines. Recall the significance of interpretation for the theory of responsibility. Other theories raise the moral question by asking what is the end or what ought I to do. Responsibility, however, holds that the fundamental question is what is happening. We indicated earlier what Niebuhr means by the effect of interpretation upon conduct. But we have not taken note of the significant divergence from the common understanding of morals which this involves. As generally understood, there is a relative independence between interpretation and one's moral decisions. It is doubtless true on most theories that choice requires some knowledge, both of fact and of norm or value. One must have knowledge of a norm or value in order to provide a principle or precept for conduct, and one must have some factual knowledge in order to know which alternative comes under his principle. But knowledge in either of these senses is only a kind of prerequisite to moral choice. Even if one assumes, as in natural law theories, that there is a close connection between the knowledge of reality and the knowledge of values and norms, such knowledge is still only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition of moral agency. Given the knowledge of what one ought to do, one must still decide to act either in accordance with the principle or not. In this respect deontology and teleology agree. For both, morality consists in obedience to an "ought," a moral law. Their divergence lies in the definition of the truly moral principle and the basis of moral authority. Deontology regards the law itself as fundamental, while teleology takes it to be derivative, having its basis in the fact that it is the means of realizing the good. It is here that responsibility differs. The idea of "ought," as Kant pointed out, implies "can." And, of course, it also implies "may not," i.e., being able to do otherwise. In other words, it presents man with a possibility, the realization of which is only effected by a decision, an act of volition.

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[1] Ibid., p. 85.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 87.

In the theory of responsibility, however, interpretation determines not what we ought to do but what we in fact do. There is no necessity for a separate act of volition to decide among alternatives provided by one's interpretation. On the contrary, the will is given its particular determination by the interpretation. There is no separate exercise of volition which may vary, given the same interpretation.

The theory of the "movement toward the universal" becomes relevant here. Niebuhr seems to suggest that interpretation can be regarded only as a preliminary to moral decision by abstracting the particular situation from its universal context. In our actual choices, however, we respond not to an abstraction but to the concrete reality. And this concrete situation is what it is only in a broader context, ultimately a universal one. It may seem that moral decision is over and above the interpretation of what is the case, but this is only because of the way the question of interpretation is handled. Moral decision is not something which is left over after the factual interpretation. Its resolution is determined already in the interpretation. The interpretation which is determinative, however, is always an interpretation of the universal, and this is the significance of the argument for the "movement toward the universal." The argument then is not for the sake of proving the existence of God. Its aim is to show how the interpretation of the particular is necessarily qualified by some understanding of the universal. And this argument is in turn integral to showing how interpretation is determinative of human conduct—the fundamental thesis of responsibility—since it is interpretation of the universal which is decisive for conduct in Niebuhr's view.[1] Thus the theory of the self as social, historical, and absolutely dependent is not only suggested as more viable than the theories of the self implied in teleology and deontology. In its "second aspect" it is also the foundation of the claim that interpretation is determinative of human conduct, and it is in this respect that the moral form of responsibility differs fundamentally from both deontology and teleology.

Our interpretation of the universal determines our interpretation of and response to the particular. For the most part, Niebuhr says, our interpretations of the universal are such as to create anxiety. The interpretation which informs our lives is one which sees in all things the law of our own destruction. We respond "as men whose ultimate future holds only encounter with death in one of its many forms."[2]

> It is not the law of our physical dying only or primarily, but the law in things, the ontological law as it were, by which the self and its communities and all that it prizes, all its labors, worthy and unworthy, its good deeds and its evil ones, must be relativized, be restricted and finally come to nothing.[3]

This "inescapable conviction about the death-dealing character of that total environment"[4] infects all our idealism and our sense of duty. It creates in us the ethics of defense or of self-maintenance against the hostile force which pervades our lives. We do what is necessary to maintain ourselves, since our view of the whole is that it is an all-encompassing threat to our existence. "Our ideals and our laws give way before the demand to do what we think is fitting in such a situation."[1] Of course, we do not always admit that this is our interpretation. Most of us cannot acknowledge even to ourselves the suspicion we harbor against the ultimate condition of our existence. We try to ignore or to forget the power to whom we are not reconciled, or else we practice appeasement and by sacrifice and the cultivation of guilt-feelings try to turn away from ourselves the hostility of the One whom we secretly regard as the enemy.[2]

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[1] The movement of Niebuhr's thought here is obscure, as is indicated by the fact that it gives the appearance of an argument for the existence of God which Niebuhr must then disavow. Thus my interpretation goes beyond what can be justified explicitly in his text. I propose that it recommends itself both because it shows how the "movement toward the universal" is not an argument for the existence of God and also because it shows what positive contribution it does make to the view of responsibility as the form of the moral life.

[2] Ibid., p. 98.

[3] Ibid., p. 140.

[4] Ibid., p. 100.

An argument for the existence of God then, according to Niebuhr, is utterly superfluous. Whatever our theories, we all inevitably do respond to the One in the many.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] It is easy to see how Niebuhr's analysis applies to pagan religions which do not even purport to be ethical. Their rites are self-conscious attempts to gain the favor of the divinity through blandishments. But Niebuhr thinks that the same procedure is present less self-consciously in the ethical religions. It strikes me that a good example is to be found in biblical religion in Job's "comforters." It is difficult to find anything formally wrong with the sentiments they express; yet Job, who virtually matches his integrity against God's, is vindicated, if not completely, at least as compared to them. Secretly, even unknown to themselves, these comforters must feel that the height of Job's folly is to expect justice from God in the first place. Their assurance that God is just (and therefore that Job must have sinned) is ultimately cynical rather than pious. They know how to keep their place, and they recommend to Job what appears to them to be obvious: when dealing with a tyrant it is expedient to confess one's own guilt rather than risk offense. Job still assumes God is just, though he does not see how; they have long since given up the assumption of God's justice and have settled for a way to get along with his injustice.

> In the contradictoriness of our existence we do respond to One action present in all actions upon us. We do interpret all things that happen to us as occurring within One realm, as related to One intention so far as this life of selfhood and community is concerned. But the One beyond the many is the enemy, the creative source whence comes destruction. Hence the color of our lives is anxiety, and self-preservation is our first law.[1]

Earlier (p. 14) we noted that Niebuhr makes a point of the significance of emergencies and suffering for human conduct. Here he seems to be suggesting that our whole lives are lived out in the ethos of emergency and suffering. Even those particular situations which do not of themselves have this character are affected, since they exist only as the calm in the center of the storm. All our actions are informed by our interpretation of the One realm in which they take place, the One limitation upon us, and the One agency present in all that acts upon us. If, in this universal emergency, we continue to act as teleologists, it is as those who seek as their end their own glory because they are so sure that otherwise they will be bereft. Or we may continue to act as deontologists, but it is [illegible] those who receive every command with the suspicion that it derives from an inimical power, "jealous of our greatness, intent upon diminishing our human stature, desirous of keeping us unfree."[2]

In contrast to the ethics of fear and defense there is an ethic of trust and confidence. Such an ethic is a possibility only by means of a conversion from the other outlook. Christians have been introduced to the possibility of a reinterpretation of the One present in the many through the mediation of Jesus Christ. The One universally present has become for them the intention of life rather than death.

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[1] Ibid., p. 140.

[2] Ibid.

> Insofar as that interpretation prevails against its negative counterpart we begin to understand all that happens to us and to which we react as occurring in a final context of life-giving rather than death-dealing, as occurring in a universal teleology of resurrection rather than a universal teleology of entombment.[1]

Niebuhr speaks of the significance of the gospel for conduct in terms of interpretation. It is a new understanding which leads to a new response. The interpretation, however, is not a theory. It is a primary response of the self rather than a secondary, reflective response. Niebuhr identifies it with faith. Our reflective theories or theologies are based upon it, but they are not a surrogate for it.

We must now attempt to summarize what we take to be the main point of Niebuhr's position. The thesis of the theory of responsibility is that conduct is determined by our interpretation of what is happening rather than by ideals or laws. Interpretation is the term Niebuhr uses for the response at the level of faith. He apparently uses this term for several reasons. First, just because it is neutral, covering both positive and negative response, distrust as well as trust. Negative response, no less than positive, is determined by an interpretation of what is the case.[2] Niebuhr also uses interpretation because it is neutral in another sense. It is not limited to those situations which are consciously interpreted as religious. Niebuhr understands the issue between trust and distrust—of response to the One power in all the many—to inform the whole of our existence. Even "informs" is too tenuous, since response is not made at one point with perhaps only implications then for other points. It is always being made. All our responses to the finite involve a response of trust or distrust to the infinite. The term faith then is avoided at the outset as being liable to connote limitation to a sphere of existence which can be isolated as religious.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 142-43.

[2] The use of the term "determines" may appear to be too strong. Niebuhr himself does not use it frequently, though he does use it. Cf. The Responsible Self, p. 62: "And these large patterns of interpretation we employ seem to determine—though in no mechanical way—our responses to action upon us." That Niebuhr is more sympathetic to a kind of determinism than one might expect is perhaps indicated in a passage in the Appendix to The Responsible Self, pp. 170ff., where he compares responsibility with Spinoza and the Stoics and even suggests that the ethics of Jesus may be closer to Islam than to views in which human freedom is absolutized. The question is treated more fully in Chapters V and VI of this thesis, where it is suggested that responsibility does not exclude human freedom but that it does involve a redefinition of it. For the present the claim that human conduct is determined by interpretation may be qualified by indicating that Niebuhr would no doubt hold

To say that conduct is determined by one's interpretation of what is happening implies that it is not determined by an "ought," whether categorical (as in deontology) or hypothetical (as in teleology). Interpretation determines not what one should do but what he in fact does. "Ought" determines conduct only in an external and superficial sense. The true significance of the conduct is determined by one's trust or distrust. For the man who lacks faith, even when he obeys a moral imperative his conduct is not determined by the law but by his distrust, which uses even the law in an attempt to control what he takes to be a hostile fate. On the other hand, neither is the conduct of the man of faith determined by an "ought." He does what he does not because

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that volition enters into interpretation. The self is not passive in its interpretations, but an active moral as well as epistemological agent. Cf. Niebuhr's treatment of imagination in The Meaning of Revelation (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1955), pp. 91ff. Something like this qualification must be implied in Niebuhr's caveat "though in no mechanical way." The fundamental point is that for the theory of responsibility interpretation and choice or volition do not vary independently. There may be an element of decision in interpretation, but different decisions imply different interpretations and not a different exercise of will in response to the same interpretation.

it is required but because he is free to. He does what is fitting and what follows naturally from his fundamental outlook. In neither case is an ought the decisive factor in moving the agent to act.

Put this way, Niebuhr's position has affinities with Paul's doctrine of the righteousness of faith and his criticisms of the righteousness of the law.[1] The theory of responsibility might well be interpreted as an elaboration of some implications of the doctrine of justification by faith and the view that whatever is not of faith is sin. There are reasons why Niebuhr does not emphasize the connection with Paul. He does not approve of the current emphasis in certain forms of theological ethics on the exegetical method.[2] Also, Paul's understanding of the matter is freighted with considerable theological it is required but because he is free to. He does what is fitting and what follows naturally from his fundamental outlook. In neither case is an ought the decisive factor in moving the agent to act.

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[1] Cf. Niebuhr's explication of Paul on the law in Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr, Christian Ethics (New York: The Ronald Press, 1955), pp. 41f:

> "One consequence of this profound revolution in man's attitude toward God is, according to Paul, a change in this attitude toward the imperative moral laws. . . . The imperative form of the law, not its content, is a relative thing which presupposes the presence in man of a desire contrary to the intention of the law. Moreover, the giving of injunctions to men is likely to arouse their self-will and so tempt them to transgress the law. Where there are imperatives, adults as well as children are tempted to see how close they can come to the edge of the forbidden. Again, imperative law cannot produce the innate, unforced graciousness of conduct evident in Jesus Christ which is so much more attractive and so much more fruitful than self-conscious goodness. The imperative law increases among men their fear of death and their sense of guilt, and because of this fear and guilt their actions are still further confused and directed into channels contrary to the spirit of the law. Law, sin, and death are all bound together for Paul. Because of sin there must be law; but law, increasing the sense of guilt and tempting men to rebellion, not only fails to eradicate the roots of sin but even tends to increase transgression. This criticism of imperative moral law is one of Paul's great contributions to moral thought, though he makes explicit here only what was present in Jesus' teaching and conduct and what a Jeremiah had sensed."

[2] Cf. James M. Gustafson, Introduction to The Responsible Self, p. 20.

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[2] Cf. James M. Gustafson, Introduction to The Responsible Self, p. 20.

The full implications of the theory of responsibility can ultimately be seen only in comparison with the view of conduct as a matter of obligation, to which it is proposed as an alternative. In the chapter which follows we will attempt a detailed analysis of such a view of morality, both in order to test Niebuhr's criticisms and also with the idea that the contrast will contribute to our understanding and evaluation of the theory of responsibility.

CHAPTER II

OBLIGATION IN BARTH

Niebuhr develops the theory of responsibility in part out of a dissatisfaction with the idea of obligation. The statement of the theory contains some critical remarks about deontology, but it cannot be said to contain a full-scale analysis or critique. Such an analysis is required both to enable us to understand the theory of responsibility and to assess the validity of the claims it makes at the expense of deontology. In this chapter we will undertake to provide an analysis of deontology as it is represented in Barth's ethics. Our procedure will be to follow up certain suggestions Niebuhr makes, but we will also attempt to understand Barth on his own terms

Niebuhr's characterization of Barth's ethics as deontological is accurate, if one means by the term a moral theory for which the concepts of command, law, imperative, obligation, ought, duty, obedience, etc., are fundamental. Aside from the fact that Barth defines ethics as the doctrine of the "command" of God, he also makes explicit arguments on behalf of viewing ethics as matter of obligation as opposed to another kind of theory. The idea of command expresses the fact that our decision is subject to the sovereign decision of God. The obligatory is better able to serve the Christian view than such concepts as the "pleasing and useful and valuable."[1] The idea of "ought" accords with the Christian understanding that in ethics the concern is not with what we will, but rather with what God wills, not with our decision in the first place but with the sovereign decision of God, to which our decision can only be obedient or disobedient. In this respect Kant "has expressed the essential concern of Christian ethics" to the extent that he insisted upon keeping the question of obligation distinct from what seems to us to be good, true and beautiful. These "natural aims" cannot serve as the basis for the formulation of the ethical. Insofar as one tries to make obligation derivative from these, he is not yet considering a genuine "ought." Our ideas and our aims are important, but they are still within the realm of claims which we make and not that of a claim made upon us. Only the latter is truly ethical.[1]

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[1] Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, II/2. Translation editors, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 650. Hereafter Church Dogmatics will be cited by volume and part-volume numbers.

> Thus the ethical question: What ought we to do?, is not sincerely put if secretly or openly it means: What do we will to do? What do we will of ourselves, in virtue of the equally objective and indisputable claims of our own will, in responsibility--but not this time genuine responsibility--to the aims which our own promptings lead us to propose?[2]

Barth accepts the Kantian critique of eudaemonistic (teleological) ethics. Christian ethics must be an ethic of a "categorical imperative."[3] For Barth the only question about Kant's formulation is whether, in his the concern for autonomy, his really was such an imperative in anything more than name. We do not seriously have to do with a categorical imperative unless our duty is seen as a decision which confronts our will from the outside in "absolute and inflexible sovereignty."[4] We experience obligation as distinct from desire, but a genuine ought is also distinct from any command which we give ourselves. The true ground of the ought is a sovereign decision which confronts our decision. It is transcendent, and not merely in thought but "objectively."[1] "The essence of the idea of obligation is not that I demand something from myself but that, with all that I can demand of myself, I am myself demanded."[2]

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[1] *Ibid.*

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 651.

Barth is not insensitive to the point that Christian conduct must be spontaneous and free. In this respect the idea of obligation, though indispensable, is not adequate. The command of God differs from other commands.

> The form by which the command of God is distinguished from all other commands, the special form which is its secret even in the guise of another command, consists in the fact that it is permission--the granting of a very definite freedom.[3]

The command of God is permission because it is the law only as it is also the gospel. Barth's formula is that the law is the form of the gospel.

> The one word of God is both Gospel and Law. It is not Law by itself and independent of the Gospel. But it is also not Gospel without Law. In its content, it is Gospel; in its form and fashion, it is Law. It is first Gospel and then Law.[4]

The significance of Barth's use of the term "form" here is not clear. We may have some sympathy with the position of Henry Sidgwick, who said, "I do not myself usually employ the antithesis of Form and

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 652.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 651.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 585.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 511.

Matter in philosophical exposition, as it appears to me open to the charge of obscurity and ambiguity."[1] Since, however, the interpretation of Barth which we will develop holds that the theory of the law as the form of the gospel is absolutely crucial to Barth's ethics, we will have to be clear about what we understand the implications of the formula to be even if we do not understand the exact significance of the terms. We propose that the law as the form of the gospel implies first that the two are inseparable. "The one Word of God is both Gospel and Law." To have knowledge of the Word of God is to have knowledge of both gospel and law. One has neither without the other. The knowledge of Jesus Christ as one's gracious Lord (gospel) necessarily includes within itself the knowledge of the Lord as the measure of one's own existence (law). Conversely, just as one does not have the gospel without the law, neither does one have the law except on the basis of the knowledge of the gospel. This is implied in the statement that the one Word of God is both law and gospel. A certain qualification, however, must be made in this respect. The law which confronts man apart from the gospel and faith with the claim to be the law of God—presumably the claims of conscience—"undoubtedly is this Law in its inmost concealed substance."[2] But this law apart from the gospel and faith and therefore as construed by man in his sin, is the law of sin and death. Even though in itself it is "holy and righteous and good" (Rom 7:12), as misused by sin it compounds sin and leads to death. Therefore, although here apart from the gospel and faith one does have to do with God, it is with the wrath of God. And Barth emphatically denies that this law leads man to Christ. On the contrary, it shuts him off and concludes him under sin until he is freed by Christ.[1] Therefore, although the law apart from the gospel and faith is the law of God, it is this law as misunderstood and with fatal consequences. This then is the first implication of the law as the form of the gospel. The law rightly understood is not allowed to become an independent theme. And this leads to the second point. That the law is not independent of the gospel means that the ground of its authority lies in God's grace. The basis of God's claim is not independent of the gospel as the declaration of grace. God's right to rule over us does not rest upon his power or even his goodness as abstractly conceived. It consists in the fact that God has graciously turned toward us.

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[1] Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (7th ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 206, n. 1.

[2] II/2, p. 589.

> His claim confronts us in the loftiness and dignity of the obligation which derives automatically from the gift that He has made us . . .[2]

Finally, the law as the form of the gospel appears to mean that the end of the law, its purpose and intention, is grace. "When it is rightly declared, its proclamation, like that of the divine election of grace, is evangelium, good news."[1] That God wills to rule over man—to have man's being conform to God's—is itself a mode of his grace. If the law is the form of the gospel, it is also true that the gospel is the content of the law. The telos of grace is the "restoration of man to the divine likeness and therefore to fellowship with God in eternal life."[2] The law then is God's rule to this end.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 590f.

[2] Ibid., p. 557. The question may be raised whether the unity of gospel and law is one of logical entailment. There are passages in Barth where something like that seems to be implied: "The truth of the evangelical indicative means that the full stop with which it concludes becomes an exclamation mark. It becomes itself an imperative." (II/2, p. 512.) There are other passages in which it does not seem to be a matter of logic: "As the one Word of God, which is the revelation and work of His grace, disposes of man, it is also the impulse directing him to a future that is in keeping with this 'disposing.'" (ibid.) My own view is that it would be a mistake to hold that it is a matter of logical entailment. I would prefer to view it as a psychological necessity. The recognition of God's favor necessarily carries with it a drive, or we may say, creates within man an impulse, directing him toward correspondence and conformity with it. Barth would probably prefer ontological rather than psychological. My only objection to this is that it seems to connote that grace is a substance and that its operation is "physical," rather than being a relationship between subjects.

One of the objections which Niebuhr makes against Barth's treatment of ethics as obedience to the command of God is that there are other actions of God upon us besides commands which also call for response. The "gospel as the declaration of divine action requires response no less than does commandment, though this response is not obedience but confidence and loyalty."[3] If our understanding of the law as the form of the gospel is correct the criticism fails to appreciate what Barth means by the command of God. Barth is clear that the command is not one kind of action alongside other acts of God. Any action of God is first of all grace; but this grace itself places us under a demand. The demand is not something which is separate. It is the demand of the gospel. "The Law is completely enclosed in the Gospel. It is not a second thing alongside and beyond the Gospel."[4] The law or the command of God is simply the name for the demand which any action of God places us under. Any action of God is always grace, but as such it is always law also. "The one Word of God is both Gospel and Law."

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[1] Ibid., p. 709.

[2] Ibid., p. 566.

[3] The Responsible Self, p. 136.

[4] II/2, p. 557.

Niebuhr's criticism at this point then appears to be wide of the mark because, if the understanding of Barth is correct, Niebuhr's own theory is not radically different. Niebuhr says that a man responds to God in trust and loyalty insofar as he understands God to be the reconciler and the giver of life rather than the destroyer and the enemy. Barth likewise understands the command of God to be the impulsion and direction given to conduct when through the gospel God is revealed to him as his gracious Lord. The command of God or the law is not an isolated imperative or demand but the claim upon man's conduct present in his revelation which is always first gospel, the good news of God's favor toward us, and also the directing of our conduct which the awareness of grace includes.

It is in virtue of the fact that the law of God is the form of the gospel that it differs from any other command and must be interpreted as permission. In it God is not against man but for him. The law is against us only insofar as we are against ourselves.[1] "The place from which man is summoned is not really a beautiful and desirable one. The prohibitions are not of something sweet and pleasant."[2] Consequently, the law does not say, "You must," but rather, "You may."

> Do this—not because an outer or inner voice now requires this of you, not because it must be so in virtue of any necessity rooted in the nature and structure of the cosmos or of man, but Do this because in so doing you may and will again live of and by My grace.

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[1] Ibid., p. 595.

[2] Ibid., p. 599.

> . . . For this, and not for any other reason, do it. You may do it. And: Do not do this—not because you again hear an outer or inner voice which seeks to make it doubtful or dreadful for you, not because there is any power in heaven or on earth to prevent or spoil or for some reason forbid it. No, but: Do not do this. . . . because you, the free man, are exempted from the necessity of doing it . . .[1]

The man who hears the command of God knows that in it God is for him and therefore he is "relieved from the post of being for himself by the One who alone can be actually and effectively for him."[2] He can confront the divine command "in a spirit of contentment, or better, with joyful participation, or better, with the burning and exclusive desire to be obedient to it."[3] Conversely, those who do not really desire it are not able to do it.[4] Without this desire and joy there is no true obedience. The command as permission is compared to the invitation to the feast in Matthew 22:1-14. He who does not come festively "spurns the invitation no less than those who are unwilling to obey and appear at all."[5]

> Reluctant obedience to God's command is not obedience, and decisively for this reason, that in itself and as such the command of God is a festive invitation.[6]

Barth has interpreted obligation in a manner which explicitly acknowledges the kind of problem Niebuhr raises about deontological ethics. Christian conduct by its very nature is something which cannot be exacted from man as a requirement. It cannot be rendered merely as that which one is obliged to do. If it is done reluctantly, then it is not done at all. The Christian acts not as he "must" but as he "may." If he is merely willing to comply and does not enjoy what he does, then he does not comply at all. In interpreting obligation as permission, has Barth simply abandoned the concept of obligation? It appears that his reasons for choosing the concept at the outset have become empty, since permission denudes obligation of its original meaning. If Barth redefines obligation so radically—as permission—does he not in effect agree with Niebuhr? The fact is that Barth does not intend to abandon the meaning of obligation in its general usage, the usage for which he adopted it in the first place. Obligation means permission, but that does not mean that it is any less obligation.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 587.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 597.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 580.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 570.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 588.

[6] *Ibid.*

> Obligation—the obligation of the real command—means permission. That was the first point. But the second is that permission—the permission which is the proper inmost form of the divine command—also means obligation.[1]

Barth has not intended to dispense with obligation in its ordinary sense. He desires only to add to it something further insofar as it applies to the divine command. The question then is not whether Barth has retained only the word obligation to denote what is in fact another concept. It is rather whether the additional meaning he gives it is not contradictory to the other meaning which he also wishes to retain. As Niebuhr states the objection, it is "paradoxical" to speak of an obligation to love, for example, since the character of love is such that to love genuinely is to love "unrequiredly." We propose to examine the concepts involved closely to determine precisely wherein the contradiction lies, but it is important for now to notice that the charge that the concepts of obligation and permission are contradictory is one which Barth himself accepts. It is not merely a charge which Niebuhr makes but which Barth might dispute. Barth quotes Bonhoeffer with approval.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 602.

> The commandment of God is permission. It differs from all human laws in that it commands freedom. It is by overcoming this contradiction that it shows itself to be God's commandment; the impossible becomes possible, and that which lies beyond the range of what can be commanded, liberty, is the true object of this commandment.[1]

Furthermore, Barth does not claim that the contradiction is overcome by distinguishing between the idea of the command of God and human command. He holds that it is not overcome conceptually at all. It is overcome only by the unity of authority and freedom having become a reality in the person of Jesus Christ.[2] The fact itself remains conceptually incomprehensible.

> If equal justice is to be done on both sides, the propositions that the right obligation is the true permission, and the right permission the true obligation, cannot possibly be deduced from a general concept of command, even of God's command. If the two propositions are to be brought together and related, as it were, in a vacuum, and something intelligible is to result, then necessarily either the conception of obligation or that of permission will become so flabby that either the one or the other loses its proper seriousness, the result being either an obligation limited by the permission or inversely a permission limited by the obligation. To identify authority and freedom is impossible as such. The reality of the form of the divine command, in which it demands as permission and is the Law as Gospel, is something which is in principle incomprehensible. Definition and construction in principle lead inevitably either to legalism on the one hand or to lawlessness on the other.[3]

The truth of the unity of authority and freedom, of command and permission, Barth says, is a "spiritual truth." It is known only in faith. "The propositions of Christian ethics are propositions of Christian dogmatics."[1] Their warrant consists in the fact that the reality which they attest has taken place in Jesus Christ.

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[1] Quoted by Barth, III/4, pp. 14-15, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, (E. T.) p. 252.

[2] II/2, p. 603.

[3] Ibid., p. 602.

We are now able to state a crucial difference between Barth and Niebuhr. Both agree that Christian conduct must be joyful and free. Both further agree that to speak of such conduct as commanded is contradictory. The difference consists in the fact that for Niebuhr the contradiction calls into question the appropriateness of the concept of obligation. For Barth, however, it is not the concept of obligation which is rendered suspect. It is admittedly inadequate. Nevertheless, it is indispensable. What is called into question is not the particular concept but conceptualization as such. "The reality of the form of the divine command, in which it demands as permission and is the Law as Gospel, is something which is in principle incomprehensible."[2]

It might be possible to adjudicate this difference by a general inquiry into the logic of theological statements. I propose to stick closer to the particular case. A few general statements, however, might serve to make the issue clear. Whether or not Niebuhr is right in his judgment of the particular concept of obligation, the appeal to incomprehensibility and the justification of contradiction (Cf. Barth's quotation from Bonhoeffer, above, p. 49) is an admission of defeat and a retreat into obscurantism. The appeal to the dogmatic character of ethical statements is no help. Contradiction would seem to be no more admissible in dogmatics than in ethics. To resort to it is an abdication of the dogmatic task itself. One might with equal justice appeal to the "spiritual truth" of dogmatic statements, and hence their incomprehensibility, as grounds for the impossibility of theology at all. It may be that spiritual truth is incomprehensible apart from knowledge of the object of faith. In this sense statements of faith may be "paradoxical," i.e., contrary to received opinion. As such they may be meaningless and incomprehensible to those whose experience warrants no such assertions. But if they are really contradictions, then they are not only meaningless in this sense; they are, strictly speaking, nonsense. They are not only meaningless apart from faith, but also of no help to the faith which seeks understanding. However miraculous its subject matter, theology must attempt to make meaningful assertions. Contradiction precludes any such meaning.

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[1] Ibid., p. 603.

[2] Ibid., p. 602.

We must turn our attention now to a more detailed examination of the concept of obligation. We have seen that according to Barth it must be interpreted as permission in order to include desire, joy, and freedom. We need to see more clearly how the concept of obligation excludes these elements as contradictory. Then we will attempt to understand why Barth, without gainsaying the contradiction, nevertheless holds on to obligation as indispensable. It may be helpful to turn to Kant briefly, since both Niebuhr and Barth acknowledge him to have been most explicit in his analysis of morality as a matter of obligation.

According to Kant, the moral possibility open to man is respect for the moral law, which he is obliged to obey from duty and not from spontaneous inclination.

> The moral condition which he can always be in is virtue, i.e., moral disposition in conflict, and not holiness in the supposed possession of perfect purity of the intentions of the will.[1]

The morality of our acts pertains to that which we are obliged to do and not to "an endeavor unbidden but gladly undertaken."[2] "For men and all rational creatures, the moral necessity is a constraint, an obligation."[3] Kant regards it as moral fanaticism if we "presume like volunteers, to flout with proud conceit the thought of duty and, as independent of command, merely to will of our own good pleasure to do something to which we think we need no command."[4] The characteristic of the idea of obligation which Kant points to here is that of "constraint." The moral situation of man is described as one of "conflict." Conflict and the necessity for constraint exist because man has both a positive attraction to the law (respect) and also desires contrary to the law. The conflict is represented as being between man's reason, which consents to the law, and his inclinations or feelings, which move him irrespective of the law and hence possibly contrary to it. In the relationship of respect for the moral law there is as yet no conflict or compulsion. One might say as a manner of speaking that the law "compels" or "constrains" our respect, but this is only in the extended sense of these words. More properly it wins or evokes our reverence or respect. We give the law our consent because of a positive attraction for it. Conflict and the necessity for constraint enter in because man has not only respect for the law but also desires which, if not inevitably contrary to the law, at least of themselves do not consult the law. It is the necessity for acting irrespective of desire which makes the moral situation one of conflict and constraint. Without the desires, which are the source of the conflict, there would be a norm of conduct; but it would not be an imperative. It would not compel man, because he would need no compelling.

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[1] Critique of Practical Reason, p. 87.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 84.

[4] Ibid., p. 85.

> A perfectly good will would thus stand quite as much under objective laws (laws of the good), but it could not on this account be conceived as necessitated to act in conformity with law, since of itself, in accordance with its subjective constitution, it can be determined only by the concept of the good. Hence for the divine will, and in general for a holy will, there are no imperatives: "I ought" is here out of place, because "I will" is already of itself necessarily in harmony with the law. Imperatives are in consequence only formulae for expressing the relation of objective laws of will to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being—for example, of the human will.[1]

Because there are conflicting desires in man, morality concerns not only conformity to law but also imperative, being "necessitated" to correspond to the law. It is this conflict and constraint which characterizes the idea of obligation. The moral possibility open to man is obedience from duty, the constraint to act in spite of his desires. There is a certain imperfection implied in the notion of obligation, but Kant regards it as deriving from the inclinations as given with the nature of humanity itself and as such not subject to moral censure. As we noted, the attempt to overcome this defect can only involve one in fanaticism. Morality for man consists in what he is obliged to do and not what he can do from spontaneous inclination. What a man does from duty is subject to his control; what he desires is not. Therefore "all the morality of actions may be placed in their necessity from duty and from respect for the law, and not from love for or leaning toward that which the action is to produce."[1]

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[1] The Moral Law, Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, trans. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1948), p. 81. Hereafter cited as Groundwork.

Kant does not fail to draw the conclusions dictated by his theory in interpreting the scriptural commandment to love one's neighbor. Strictly speaking, love as a feeling, an inclination, cannot be commanded. The commandment to love must be interpreted to mean that we should act kindly no matter what our feelings.

> It is doubtless in this sense that we should understand too the passages from Scripture in which we are commanded to love our neighbor and even our enemy. For love out of inclination cannot be commanded; but kindness done from duty—although no inclination impels us, and even although natural and unconquerable disinclination stands in our way—is practical, and not pathological, love, residing in the will and not in the propensions of feeling, in principles of action and not of melting compassion; and it is this practical love alone which can be an object of command.[2]

We have already seen that Barth cannot accept Kant's solution at this point. Obedience which is done in spite of one's feelings is only partial. The command of God requires not only that we do this or that. It does that too, but beyond that it also claims ourselves. "In its specific requirements and prohibitions, it demands everything, the totality of my life."[3] If then we admit obedience without inclination we allow that this aspect of man's inner being remains unconformed to the divine will. True obedience, according to Barth, does not leave man's inner being outside the influence of God's law. The command of God does not leave man "unmoved and unchanged in his innermost self."[1] Kant asserts that action done in conformity to the law but not for the sake of the law has legality but not morality.[2] Barth takes the requirement one step further—a step which Kant explicitly rejects—and holds that an act is not truly moral if it is not done freely in the sense of being desired and enjoyed. Contrary to Kant, Barth does not allow that an act can be done for the sake of the law if it is not also done gladly. Obligation which is not also permission is purely legalistic.[3] Legalism in this sense is one of the objections which Barth raises to casuistry. It makes it all too easy for man to adhere to a decision which is supposedly God's command "but in so doing to preserve for himself the false freedom of being somewhere else and thus refusing the obedience due to God's command in spite of his acceptance of the casuistical decision."[4] God wills that man himself—the total man, including his desires—should be there in His cause.

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[1] Critique of Practical Reason, p. 84.

[2] Groundwork, p. 67. Cf. also Critique of Practical Reason, p. 86:

> "The command which makes this [love of neighbor] a rule cannot require that we have this disposition but only that we endeavor after it. To command that one do something gladly is self-contradictory."

[3] II/2, p. 610.

> Action means not only to choose and realise this or that, but to choose and realise oneself in this or that. So, then, an action done in obedience to God cannot consist only in carrying out something which God wishes, but in man's offering himself to God in so doing.[5]

Barth rejects the idea that there can be a true obedience which does not include joyful correspondence. Reluctant obedience simply means that man's feelings remain outside the influence of God's command. Our analysis of obligation in Kant, however, revealed that this partial resistance or at least neutrality is inherent to the concept. If there is no necessity for constraint, then one does not have to do with obligation. At this point one might hold that Barth has redefined the notion of obligation in an un-Kantian way. There is, of course, no requirement that he be Kantian in this respect. At many points this appears to be what Barth does. He frequently speaks of how the command of God differs from other commands. The difficulty with this solution, as we have seen, is that although Barth interprets obligation as permission, he also insists that permission is obligation—and this in a quite Kantian sense. That is, he admits that it is impossible to combine the notions of obligation and permission because they are contradictory. If they are in fact contradictory, it can only be for the reason that this Kantian analysis of obligation is not, after all, rejected.

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[1] Ibid., p. 631.

[2] Critique of Practical Reason, p. 74.

[3] II/2, p. 602.

[4] III/4, p. 14.

[5] Ibid., p. 13.

We must attempt now to understand why in spite of the interpretation of the command of God as permission, Barth insists that this interpretation cannot consist of doing away with the idea of obligation. The command of God even as permission must remain obligation. The reason, Barth says, is that permission without obligation leads to lawlessness, just as obligation without permission leads to legalism.[1]

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[1] II/2, p. 602. What Barth objects to here as "legalism" is apparently the view he criticizes in his attack on casuistry, i.e., the view which regards the claims of the law as something alien and which therefore measures carefully in order to determine how much must be conceded to God and how much can be retained for one's own. The objection to it is both theological and moral.

Barth assumes that without obligation there is no way of accounting for the will of God as an objective norm to which human behavior must correspond. We have seen, however, that Kant makes a distinction between conformity to law and obligation. Even a will not thought to be "necessitated" to act in conformity to the law could nevertheless stand quite as much under objective laws. If one uses the term obligation for this being "necessitated," then it would seem that it is at least possible (logically) that it is expendable so far as lawfulness is concerned. And if this distinction, which seems quite legitimate, were accepted by Barth, he would not have to insist upon obligation in a manner which he admits is impossible to combine with permission.

Kant's distinction is in effect one between the norm of human conduct (the law) and motivation. Moral motivation consists in respect for the law. In human beings Kant thinks that motivation also includes an element of constraint because of the existence in man of contrary desires which also move the will. If the motivation were conceived of as different—for example, if there were no resistence—that need not mean that the norm would be altered. Barth seems to think that to speak of desire in the matter of motivation endangers the norm of conduct. But desire as the motivation toward the good by no means of itself implies that the good is what is desired as such. Kant is perfectly clear that the law as the norm of conduct is prior to and the cause of respect. He does not think that respect is constitutive of the law; the law is not defined as what is respected. Similarly in Barth's case, the absence of obligation would not imply, as Barth seems to think, that the norm of human behavior becomes simply what is desired. Nor does the lack of obligation mean that correspondence to the objective norm is optional. The law is "binding." What is at stake is how it is binding. As obligation it prevails in spite of the resistance or partial resistance of man. Apart from such resistance and the necessity for compulsion it still might be binding upon man but now by altering his desires rather than by requiring their repression. For Barth to hold to permission apart from obligation need not mean that the law is less binding. It might mean that it binds by enlisting man's desires in its service. When Barth describes the law as the form of the gospel it appears that this is what he means. It is the grace of God which is the basis for the divine claim, and it proves itself effective by having the power to "win" and "convince" man.[1] If, when Barth insists that permission is also obligation, he meant only that it is a claim in this sense, it would not be contradictory to permission. Permission does not necessarily conflict with a binding claim. What it does conflict with is the resistance and compulsion implied in obligation. Obligation is contradictory to permission because the former includes correspondence to a norm of behavior over the resistance of conflicting desires, while the latter directs the desires to what is indicated in the law.

Barth sometimes speaks of the norm of human conduct as divine "direction."

> God's direction is the direction to do this, to make use of his freedom. . . . The kingdom of freedom is not one in which he can act as lord. It is not for him to try to act in it according to his

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[1] Ibid., p. 564: "If an answer to this question [of the good] is really to call and win and convince, if it is not merely to instruct and interest man but to move him actually to do the good . . ." This part-sentence is interesting because the distinction between "instruct" and "move" is similar to the one I have suggested between norm and motive.

> own judgment. If he did, he would certainly not be free, he would secretly have left that place. It is the house of his Father, and he needs the Father's guidance to live in it and therefore to be free.[1]

The concept of direction seems to be consciously different from that of command. The difference, of course, is that the coercive element has been avoided. God's direction is like advice or a hint. "It is not a loud and stern and foreign thing, but the quiet and gentle and intimate awakening of children in the Father's house to life in that house."[2] But because of this difference, direction seems far more compatible with the general outline of Barth's theory of the relation of ethics to the gospel. The law interpreted as direction (rather than as command) makes clearer the view of the law as the form of the gospel. The same Word of God is both Gospel and law; it is gospel first and then law. The Word which causes us to know the Father (gospel) also allows us to be at home in his house (law). The law is not stern and harsh because it is the law which follows from the gospel, the law of the gracious Father. It is a means of the Father's grace. It does not compel man; it allows him to be at home in his Father's house. As such it frees him by enabling him to find his way. Thus it makes sense to speak of direction as permission in a way that it does not make sense to speak of command as permission. Direction retains the normative sense of law but without compulsion. Freedom does not consist in going one's own way. One cannot be free outside the Father's house, as an exile or an expatriate, but even within that house he needs the Father's guidance, just because it is the Father's house.[1]

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[1] IV/1, p. 100.

[2] _Ibid_.

Barth argued earlier that it is impossible to show a coincidence between authority and freedom conceptually.[2] They are contradictory. Any attempt to bring them together simply results in the weakening of one or the other. With the substitution, however, of the notion of direction for that of command Barth seems himself to have accomplished what he said was impossible. He has maintained God's authority and yet has shown that it is not only compatible with freedom but that freedom is impossible without it. In effect he appears to have recognized that authority is not identical with command and that it is only command and not authority as such which is incompatible with freedom. This recognition makes the unity of authority and freedom a logically possible assertion. It does not, of course, in itself make it true. The coincidence between God's authority and human freedom is not self-evident (analytic). The warrant for it lies outside the concepts in revelation. But the attestation of the revelation does not result in a contradiction.

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[1] There are other concepts also which Barth uses to represent the Christian understanding of morals, which are not vulnerable to the criticisms made against obligation. Not the least of these is "responsibility." For example, Barth says:

> "It is the idea of responsibility which gives us the most exact definition of the human situation in face of the absolute transcendence of the divine judgment. We live in responsibility, which means that our being and willing, what we do and what we do not do, is a continuous answer to the Word of God spoken to us as a command." (II/2, p. 641. Cf. also, ibid., p. 756).

The concept of responsibility is developed extensively by Barth in III/4 as an important part of his doctrine of man. (See the long section, pp. 174-197.) One could point out that in certain respects the term responsibility is used by Barth to denote what is essentially the concept of obligation. We noticed in Chapter I that Niebuhr suggests that this is true in many writers who use the term simply as a synonym for obligation. Thus Niebuhr would no doubt object to the fact that in the above quotation Barth speaks of response as an answer to a "command." In III/4 too Barth speaks of responsibility as having the character of "obedience." (p. 179.) The claim, however, could equally be made that in these passages Barth is not merely giving responsibility the meaning of obligation, but that on the contrary, the terms command and obedience are given new meaning and content. Thus for the term command one might suggest that Barth means simply a claim, without the negative implication of resistance and conflict which are present in obligation. Likewise the term obedience at times has the meaning of "correspondence"(II/2, p. 576), which appears to mean virtually the same thing as Niebuhr's "fitting response." Our own view is that to the extent that Barth moves in this direction, many of the problems of the concept of obligation are overcome. Nevertheless, it is also true that, in spite of various movements in Barth's thought toward overcoming the difficulties in the concept of obligation, there is an equally persistent trend--to be considered in Chapters III and V below --which prevents a consistent resolution.

[2] The terms authority and freedom are used by Barth interchangeably with obligation and permission. Cf. quotation above, p. 49.

The resolution of the contradiction between authority and freedom depends upon the recognition that authority is not identical with obligation. This recognition in no way implies a compromise of authority in the favor of freedom. On the contrary, we have found that the interest of absolute authority itself is not at all served by the concept of obligation, since obligation implies resistance and only partial consent to the law. But there is a second consideration involved which has to do with the concept of freedom. Our assertion that authority and freedom are reconcilable presupposes not only a definition of authority but also one of freedom. We argued that our case against obligation did not mean that consent to authority is optional or that authority does not involve a binding claim. But if authority is binding and consent is not optional then certainly this is incompatible with some notions of freedom. If freedom is defined as a choice between obedience and disobedience, between consent or nonconsent to authority, than an authoritative claim precludes this sort of freedom. It is significant, however, that in his development of obligation as permission, Barth nowhere defines freedom in this manner. Rather freedom as Barth uses the idea appears to mean the possibility of choosing in accordance with authority. The consent to authority must be wholehearted and done gladly. It cannot be mere compliance. This is wherein the freedom consists and not in the possibility of choosing otherwise. In fact freedom is defined by Barth as the exemption from the necessity of choosing otherwise.[1] Choosing contrary to authority is not considered by Barth to be the exercise of freedom. Disobedience and sin always mean slavery. "What we do as sinners is not in freedom, but in the greatest unfreedom."[2] The fact is that Barth does not have the slightest stake in the definition of freedom as the choice between divine authority and something else. Yet it is precisely this latter definition of freedom which is presupposed in his assertion that authority and freedom are contradictory. Of course if this is the definition of freedom involved, then they are contradictory. The one can be asserted only at the expense of the other. But the concession of a contradiction is not at all necessary for Barth because this definition of freedom appears in Barth only to be rejected. Yet it is clearly this conception of freedom, elsewhere rejected by Barth, which is involved in the argument that it is impossible for thought to conceptualize the coincidence between authority and freedom.

Barth holds on to the concept of obligation because he thinks it is essential to divine authority. He acknowledges that it is impossible to combine with the idea of human freedom. The argument against obligation, however, does not rest upon asserting the claims of human freedom alone. It is Barth himself who first suggests that the obligation is not exactly appropriate even to divine authority. It is inappropriate because it implies only compliance and not wholehearted, joyful correspondence to the will of God. Barth tries to surmount this difficulty, which he himself points out, by suggesting that the command of God differs from all other commands in that it commands the whole man--inner as well as outer. He admits that this assertion is contradictory, but such are the requirements of "spiritual truth." Our argument has been that this solution is both impossible and unnecessary.

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[1] II/2, p. 587.

[2] Ibid., p. 589.

CHAPTER III

DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND GENERAL ETHICS IN BARTH

The preceding chapter consisted of an examination of obligation in Barth's ethics. On the basis of a suggestion by Niebuhr, we argued that obligation is not an appropriate concept for theological ethics. What is and what is not an appropriate concept, however, depends upon what one understands theological ethics to be. So far we have merely assumed that Barth and Niebuhr are attempting to conceptualize the same thing, i.e., that they have the same general understanding of the requirements of theological ethics and that the issue is merely how best to give them conceptual expression. It is now time to question that assumption. We will find that Niebuhr and Barth differ not only at the level of conceptual analysis but in theological content as well.

Theological ethics, according to Barth has the task of understanding the Word of God. As theological science ethics, no less than dogmatics, has this for its subject matter. It is not the case that dogmatics has to do with God while ethics treats of man and his life. When theology turns from dogmatics to the task of ethics, it does not change directions or take up a new starting point.[1] It does not begin de novo with the existence of man and the problem of his conduct. In himself and as such man does not constitute an object of theology. God is the object of theology, and the task of ethics is the interpretation of the Word of God. Christian ethics does its task

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[1] II/2, p. 543.

> only when it no longer adopts a new standpoint and method in the transition from dogmatics to ethics, when it makes and keeps as its central concept, as its starting-point and destination, not the action of man in itself and as such, but the claiming of man by the command of God.[1]

Human existence and conduct become a proper object of theology only because the Word of God is itself concerned with man.[2] Theology takes up the theme of human existence because it is the theme of the Word of God. Christian ethics, therefore, is not an independent theological science with its own subject matter and its own method. On the contrary, the dogmatics of the Christian Church is itself already ethics implicitly and must become so explicitly as its own internal requirement.

> For who can possibly ask what is meant by the knowledge of God, His divine being, His divine perfections, the election of His grace, without an awareness at every point of the demand which is put to man by the fact that this God is his God, the God of man? How can God be understood as the Lord if that does not involve the problem of human obedience?[3]

Because Christian ethics is integral to and dependent upon dogmatics, it is not concerned with "ethics" defined as the inquiry into the goodness or rightness of human behavior as such. On the contrary, such an ethics exists at all only as "a result and in prolongation of the fall."[4] "Strange as it may seem, that general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin."[5] Its fault lies just in the fact that it treats the ethical question apart from the grace of God, which is its true origin. It thinks of it as a question that man must raise about his own existence or one to which he must himself provide an answer out of his own resources; whereas, rightly considered, the ethical question only arises because what is good has already been said to man.[1] When man tries to raise the question for himself apart from the Gospel he is guilty of desiring to be like God. "He wants to know of himself (as God does) what is good and evil."[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 546.

[2] I/2, p. 793.

[3] II/2, p. 512.

[4] Ibid., p. 517.

[5] Ibid., p. 518.

The uniqueness of Barth's proposal is not that he maintains that the Word of God is the answer to the ethical problem. This is precisely what he does not do. There is no ethical problem prior to and independent of the Word of God; or rather there is, as Barth says, only per nefas.[3] Theological ethics cannot begin with the problematic condition of human existence and then propose the Word of God as the solution to the problem. Barth's objection at this point is that to begin with man makes it impossible ever to arrive at the Word of God. "What begins with the human self cannot end with the knowledge of God and of His command."[4] When one attempts to introduce the Word of God in this manner as an answer to the question of man, he no longer has to do with the Word of God. "The Word of God is not the Word of God unless it precedes this question of man's existence, unless it is its origin even before it becomes its answer."[5] Otherwise the problem of human conduct becomes the measure of all things.[1] But the Word of God measured by another standard is no longer the Word of God.

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[1] Ibid., p. 537.

[2] Ibid., p. 517.

[3] Ibid., p. 536.

[4] Ibid., p. 541.

[5] I/2, p. 792.

> If theology, and therefore theological ethics, is in principle the science of the Word of God . . . it is man who must be the questioned in face of these statements, and not ethics itself which must answer the questions of man with its statements.[2]

The attempt to begin with the human situation and then to offer God as its solution is the change in direction which Barth says must not take place when theology turns from dogmatics to ethics.[3] When this change does take place the effect is that

> the distinctive Whence? and Whither? of theological ethics are smothered by the various questions man as such has to put and would like to see answered in relation to the shaping of his life. These questions of human life replace the command of God as the proper theme, the framework of all thinking on the subject.[4]

The command of God can no longer be understood for what it is, since it has been reduced to a "predicate of the man who believes in God."[5] It is not the action of man in himself and as such which is the concern of ethics. On the contrary, Christian ethics is concerned with the Word of God, in respect of which it claims the man who hears it in his being and conduct.

According to Barth there are only two alternatives: either ethics will be regarded as subordinate to dogmatics or the reverse will take place, ethics assuming the proportions of the primary theological discipline.[1] When this latter happens, it means that man, his existence and conduct, becomes the original object of theology.

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[1] II/2, p. 545.

[2] _Ibid_., p. 546.

[3] Of course, there is no change when dogmatics itself begins with the human situation as it does in most modern theology according to Barth. In that case the method of both dogmatics and ethics requires a change.

[4] _Ibid_., p. 544.

[5] _Ibid_.

> Since independent ethical systems are always in the last resort determined by general anthropology, this inevitably means that dogmatics itself and theology as a whole simply becomes applied anthropology.[2]

This procedure has become the rule rather than the exception in modern theology. "Therefore in dogmatics and ethics alike, as is Schleiermacher's expressed opinion, we find ourselves in the sphere of anthropology."[3] In volume I/1 of Church Dogmatics Barth suggests that the attempt to ground theology in existentialist philosophy is simply a continuation of the anthropological line of Schleiermacher-Ritschl-Herrmann.[4] Because in the first edition of his work (Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik) Barth gave the appearance of doing the same thing, he abandoned it as a false start. "An anthropology, even though a Church anthropology, was thus being put forward as the ground of knowledge for decisive propositions about the word of God."[5] Barth regards it as a source of gratification that the critics of the first edition attacked it from the point of view of lacking a proper anthropology.

> For I should have been bound to regard it as a great disgrace really to do what Gogarten luckily has discovered I have not done, but which he would gladly have seen done, namely, erect a "proper

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[1] I/2, pp. 782-83.

[2] Ibid., p. 783.

[3] Ibid., p. 788.

[4] I/1, p. x.

[5] Ibid., p. 143.

> anthropology" as the "centre," "the main task," "the real problem of theology" . . .[1]

Barth recognizes that what Gogarten means by "proper anthropology" is that man "cannot be thought of apart from the God who has united Himself with man in revelation."[2] He paraphrases Gogarten's proposal:

> The decisive propositions in Gogarten's anthropological programme are to the effect that between the doctrine of man on the one side and the doctrine of God on the other there is a circle: "there is no understanding of man without understanding of God, but . . . this God again I cannot understand, unless I already understand man."[3]

Barth does not deny that theology consists of a kind of circle. Knowledge of God and knowledge of man are given together. A kind of equation exists so that knowledge of God includes knowledge of man. What Barth denies is that this equation can be reversed to say that the knowledge of man includes the knowledge of God. As he puts it, the theological circle is a closed one which can be entered only at one point. Knowledge of man follows necessarily from the knowledge of God, but the reverse does not hold. It is not possible to make man, even man together with God, the starting point of theology. Knowledge within the theological circle is irreversible.[4]

Ethics too is involved in the theological circle. The knowledge of God includes the knowledge of human conduct. As we have seen, Barth asks: "How can God be understood as the Lord if that does not involve the problem of human obedience?" To this extent then the problem of dogmatics "coincides with the ethical problem."[1] Ethical inquiry, however, only follows from the knowledge of God. Barth has already argued that prior to the knowledge of God there is no legitimate ethical problem. Ethics treated independently as a general inquiry into the goodness or rightness of human behavior corresponds exactly with the conception of sin. Christian ethics is the knowledge of human existence and conduct which follows from knowledge of God. Theology is concerned in the first place not with man's self-determination. Nor is the fact that man must in any case decide and choose as a necessity of his existence the crucial thing for theological ethics. What is important for theological ethics is not man's self-determination as such but the self-determination which becomes his as a result of his knowledge of God. It is not the necessity for choice which makes the object (of choice) important; it is the object which makes it necessary to decide.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 145. Barth's ellipsis.

[4] Ibid., p. 148.

Anthropology, even a church anthropology which does not see man apart from God, cannot serve as the starting point for either dogmatics or ethics. According to Barth, it was Schleiermacher who first thought such a procedure possible, and after him the same conclusion was drawn "from a bad motive" by Ludwig Feuerbach.[2] To make anthropology the basis of theology is to imply that the Word of God is a "predicate of man."

> If there is something the Word of God is not, it is not a predicate of man, even of the man who receives it, therefore, neither of man who speaks, hears, and recognises it in the sphere of the Church. Such it would have to be if the closer determinations of its nature were really derivable from an analysis of the concrete situation of this man . . .[3]

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[1] II/2, p. 535.

[2] I/1, p. 143.

[3] Ibid.

The phrase "predicate of man" may have its roots in Barth's consideration of the challenge Ludwig Feuerbach poses to theology, namely that it is anthropology without remainder. Barth says that according to Feuerbach nothing can be said of God which is not first in the heart of man.[1] The predicates man would apply to God belong originally to man since they are conceived by him. They do not depend upon the idea of God at all. Rather the reverse is true; the idea of God depends upon them. "Thus, the rank of the first being, the rank of deity, in truth belongs to these predicates, not to that subject (God)."[2] According to Barth, protestations that Feuerbach's interpretation is a misunderstanding or a malicious falsification can amount only to so many words as long as theology itself takes its beginning from man and regards him as its original object. If theology begins, for example, with the religious capacity of man, how can it deny that the predicates it intends to apply to God belong originally and therefore properly, and even exclusively, to man?

Feuerbach's charge against theology is that man has created God in his own image. In this context Barth's concern that the Word of God not be treated as if it were a "predicate of man" suggests an attempt to insure that theology's object is not a mere projection but a genuine reality other than itself. The point to be learned from Feuerbach would then be that theology must not speak of man's relationship to God in a way which might equally well be represented as an objectless relationship, one in which man is merely self-related. The phrase "predicate of man" would mean then a mere projection without any objective reality. If theology takes its start with a consideration of man, e.g., his religious capacities or his religious needs or both, and only from there develops its warrant for speaking about God, then it may be that God is not an independent reality at all. He may be simply a predicate of man, since arrived at on the basis of an analysis of man.

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[1] Karl Barth, Introduction to Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. xvi.

[2] Ibid., pp. xviii-xix.

Barth grants Feuerbach his point, and appears to draw the conclusion that if theology is not to be vulnerable to the suggestion that its object is merely a human projection it cannot begin with man as its original object. But sceptical questions may be asked of a theology of revelation no less than of any other kind. Is it possible for theology to secure itself against such scepticism by some systematic decision? In his own doctrine of God Barth admits that the procedure of beginning with revelation is no guarantee of theology's object.

> The fact that we have continually spoken of the grace of revelation, that we have continually tried to clarify by these concepts all the other concepts applied, is obviously not a final protection at this point. For the concept of revelation, too, is obviously a general human concept, as also is that of grace. It is quite possible that, even with a most central and systematic application of these concepts, we may still represent the immanent truth of a meta-physico-anthropological relation, but not at all the veracity of our knowledge of God.[1]

It appears that Barth does not intend revelation to be a recourse for theology. Theology can never hope to free itself of this question. There is no security in any such system, even a system of revelation. The assurance which is possible to theology comes to faith. "And faith does not have recourse to anything. . . . Faith refuses to grasp after any axioms and guarantees."[1] But what then does theology have to learn from Feuerbach? If there is no systematic guarantee that theological assertions are not merely "predicates of man," how does Feuerbach's question affect the issues of theological method? Of course, it does not follow that because theology has no ultimate assurance except that which comes from God, method is a matter of indifference. On the other hand Barth's criticism of theology which begins with man is based upon a vulnerability to Feuerbach's scepticism. Since no theological method can overcome this question in principle how can this particular issue be a criterion as between theological procedures?

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[1] II/1, p. 245.

The issue need not however, be one of God's objectivity at all. If theology defines God merely from the standpoint of the role he plays in the life of man, it may be that it is appropriate to speak of a reality which is a "predicate of man," no matter how objective it is. For theology to begin with man in this sense means that it is concerned with God only as an essential aspect in the existence of man. In this sense the way surely cannot lead from anthropology to theology, for it means that man's first concern is for himself and for God only insofar as that is essential to his own self-concern. This latter is what Barth appears to mean when he says that independent ethics, ethics not subordinated to dogmatics, makes of God a predicate of man. Ethics cannot take up the question of human existence for itself and then later attempt to introduce God as the solution to the problem. A god considered only from the standpoint of being the solution to the problem of human existence is defined already as a mere aspect, however necessary, in the human sphere and may be considered a predicate of man in this sense irrespective of the question of objectivity. Man's concern for himself is a necessary presupposition for any interest he has in such a God. There is, as Barth has said, a certain coincidence between concern with God and self-concern, between knowledge of God and knowledge of man. But this coincidence is one in which the terms cannot be reversed. God is necessarily the definiens, man the definiendum. Man is defined by his relationship to God. But to define God by his relationship to man is to reduce him to a predicate of man.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 249.

We have noted that Barth considers the relation of "the ethical" to the Christian as problematic. Christian ethics cannot be understood as the development of general ethics, and in fact it makes ethics as generally understood impossible. The focus of attention has been on the fact that there is no way of proceeding from knowledge of man's existence to the knowledge of God and his command. Looked at in this manner Barth sees only discontinuity between what generally passes for ethics and Christian ethics. On the other hand, Barth does not deny that Christian ethics is also concerned "in some way" with the goodness of human action.[1] If one begins with the Word of God he is necessarily involved with the problem of human existence and conduct. The qualification which Barth enters under this "in some way" is that the relationship between God and man is uninvertible. There is a way from the knowledge of the Word of God to knowledge of human existence and conduct, but there is no way from a consideration of human existence and conduct to the Word of God.

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[1] II/2, p. 520.

In the course of our treatment of Barth on the uninvertibility of the relationship between knowledge of God and knowledge of man we have been involved in a distinction which Barth himself does not make. The problem of uninvertibility is dealt with by Barth in intimate connection with the problem of human sinfulness. In the argument against Gogarten referred to earlier Barth holds that knowledge of God cannot be based upon anthropology. What Gogarten calls a "proper anthropology" is impossible because of the fall.

> This direct discernment of the original connection between God and man, discernment of the creation of man which as such is also the revelation of God, is, according to Reformed principles as to the seriousness of sin, taken from us by the Fall and only restored in the Gospel, in revelatio specialis.[1]

The presupposition of a revelation of God in man's created state is possible only on the basis of a natural theology, which is appropriate only in Roman Catholicism. This is the argument Barth makes against Gogarten. In another context, arguing against Catholicism, Barth also appeals to the "seriousness of sin." Catholic ethics with its coordination of moral philosophy and moral theology accomplishes a surreptitious harmony between heaven and earth, between God and man. According to Barth, it holds that moral philosophy, using the power of natural reason is capable of apprehending the imperative which has its roots in man's being. Moral theology, on the other hand, using the resources of revelation concerns itself with the healing of fallen man and the elevating of man's nature into godlikeness. In this concept the rule is Gratia non destruit, sed supponit et perfecit naturam.[2]

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[1] I/1, p. 147.

[2] II/2, p. 529.

The criticisms which Barth makes of Catholicism imply that it is sin which makes the Catholic view of the harmony between man and God "surreptitious." In the case of Gogarten also the implication is that it is the fall which makes the relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man uninvertible. But if our interpretation of uninvertibility is correct, it has nothing to do with the "seriousness of sin." God is not a predicate of man, not because man is a sinner but because man is man, although the effort to treat God as a predicate of man may be sinful. Barth's argument against the Catholic formulation is not properly a question whether the natural man, because of the conditions of sin, can know his true end, but whether it is appropriate to identify any end of man as such--natural or supernatural, knowable or unknowable--with the command of God. The coincidence that is possible to claim between these two depends upon the insistence that the command of God remain the first term and the equation not be reversed. It would appear that Catholic ethics no less than neo-Protestant ethics regards this relationship as invertible. The objection to be leveled at the scheme in which moral theology consists of a superstructure erected upon the substructure of moral philosophy is not that the substructure is faulty, i.e., because of sin. It is rather that it will not do to treat God simply as a supernatural aspect necessary for the completion of the human sphere, however healthy the latter may be.

The criticism which Barth sometimes makes against both Catholic and neo-Protestant ethics is that they depend upon a "general anthropology." But we have seen already that it is not the fact that the anthropology is general that makes it unsuitable as a basis for theology or theological ethics. Barth's Christliche Dogmatik was a false start, not because it made use of a general anthropology, but because no anthropology, even a church anthropology, is suitable as a basis for the determination of the Word of God. Nevertheless Barth goes to considerable trouble to disqualify a theological anthropology as the basis for ethics on the grounds that the life of the man of faith is "hidden with God in Christ."[1] Colossians 3:3 ("For you died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." RSV) serves Barth as the basis of the rejection of a church anthropology which is not based upon Christology in the same way that the fall and sin rule out the possibility of a general anthropology. But the former is as superfluous as the latter.

In objecting to "ethics" Barth sometimes protests that God alone is good.[2] What he means in this context is not that there is not a human goodness which corresponds to the divine. It is just this correspondence to the divine in which the goodness of human conduct consists. Barth's meaning is that there is no ideal of human existence or conduct in itself. Theology cannot regard ethics as the business of attempting to discern a norm of human behavior immanent in human existence. The reason is simply that which we have been discussing under the rubric of uninvertibility. This is one of the things Barth means when he says that Christian ethics is concerned with human conduct only "in some way." But when Barth allows that Christian ethics is only concerned with human conduct in some way, he has in mind not only the qualification of uninvertibility but also that of sin; and, as we say, he is not careful about distinguishing between the two. Because of human sin, when Barth says that God alone is good or that the good is what God does, he means not merely that the norm of human goodness is not an ideal of human existence as such but also that man is inevitably in contradiction with the true norm, God's will. Man is a sinner, and because of his sin his righteousness cannot be a matter of something which he himself does in his own action. In the first sense the statement that God alone is good means that man's goodness can consist only in conforming to this original good; in the second sense it means that even correspondence to the norm must in the first place be something done for man and not by him. Because of man's sin, what God does in Jesus Christ is not only the righteousness of God to which man must correspond. It is also the correspondence which the God-man accomplishes in man's behalf. Man's sin makes his situation one in which it is impossible for him to achieve even a measure of righteousness. In his confrontation with God's command he is proved "relentlessly and irrefutably to be its transgressor."[1]

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[1] I/2, p. 782.

[2] II/2, p. 547.

> Neither as a whole nor in detail can our action mean our justification before God. It does not spring from a true awareness of what we ought to do. It is simply the self-willed desire of man to know good and evil. It is his craving for the divine likeness of a human existence reconciled with God in and of itself, not needing divine grace. It is itself the fall which separates man from God. And in this way it establishes something that man would prefer to deny—the character of the covenant between God and man as a covenant of grace. But this means that Jesus Christ is indispensable as the Mediator of this covenant . . .[2]

Jesus Christ is the man who renders the obedience God requires. He acts both as the electing and sanctifying God and as elect and sanctified man.[3] "Primarily and properly, what God wills with man and to have from man is not decided and executed and revealed in us, but in Jesus Christ."[1] The right conduct of man consists first of all in the action of Jesus Christ for him. "In His person God has acted rightly towards us. And in the same person man has also acted rightly for us."[2] What decides man's righteousness is not his life and work, not even his confession of Jesus, but Jesus' confession of him.[3] Theological ethics inquires about the extent to which the sanctification of man in Jesus Christ has already taken place.[4]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 742.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 645.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 740.

One may be forgiven for asking at this point whether there is any room for ethics at all, given these statements. Perhaps it is a grave understatement for Barth to say that ethics is subordinate to dogmatics. Does he not really mean that ethics is replaced by dogmatics? Barth raises the issue himself.

> We are those whose place has been taken by another, who lives and suffers and acts for them, who for them makes good that which they have spoiled, who—for them, but also without them and even against them—is their salvation. That is what we are. And what is left to us? What place is there for us when we are like that? In what sense is the history of the acts of God at this centre and end of our history? Are we not without history? Have we not lost all responsibility? Are we not reduced to mere spectators? Is not our being deprived of all life or activity? Or does it not lack all significance as our life and activity?[5]

With this clear statement of the problem in view, Barth's reply is simply that the salvation which comes to us in Jesus Christ does not mean "the extinguishing of our humanity, but its establishment."[6] All that remains to man is simply to affirm and be thankful for what comes to him in Jesus Christ, but in this consists the genuine being of man, and also ethics as the self-determination which corresponds to the divine determination. "The ethical problem of Church dogmatics can consist only in the question whether and to what extent human action is a glorification of the grace of Jesus Christ."[1] What differentiates between good and evil in our lives depends upon whether we "attest and praise" and "give our witness to" that which has been done for us in Jesus Christ.[2] With respect to the problem of uninvertibility it is possible to see that the objection which Barth raises to "the ethical" does not preclude theological ethics from having to do with human conduct "in some way." That is, the assertion and the qualification can be clearly developed as not mutually exclusive. In the case of the problem of sin and atonement it does not seem that the relation between assertion and denial has been worked out to show how the two fit together. Barth simply asserts that God's assumption of responsibility in our place is the foundation of our own responsibility and not its annihilation. Christian ethics still has to do with what we do and omit doing "in some way," but the explanation of the qualification does not so readily appear. Barth asserts both (1) that what decides a man's righteousness is not his confession of Jesus, but Jesus' confession of him and (2) that the differentiation between good and evil in our lives depends upon whether we attest and praise what Jesus Christ has done. But he has given us very little hint how these statements are to be combined.

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[1] Ibid., p. 738.

[2] Ibid., p. 539.

[3] Ibid., p. 692.

[4] Ibid., p. 540.

[5] IV/1, p. 14.

[6] Ibid., pp. 14-15.

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[1] II/2, p. 540.

[2] Ibid., p. 632.

The problem is further complicated. Barth allows, even insists, that the Christian life includes correspondence to the will of God.

> As distinct from justification, and as its necessary consequence, this subjection of man to the divine direction is usually called sanctification. It is nothing other than the basic presupposition of all Christian ethics. Sanctification is the claiming of all human life and being and activity by the will of God for the active fulfillment of that will.[1]

God's turning to sinful man means that conversion of the latter to Him cannot be lacking.[2] "What is the forgiveness of sins (however we understand it) if it is not directly accompanied by an actual liberation from the committal of sin?"[3] Jesus Christ is the Holy One but he stands at the head of the saints. Sanctification has already come on all men de iure in Jesus Christ, but it also comes de facto on the saints in virtue of their participation in the sanctity of Jesus Christ.[4]

> From what we have seen, the "saints" are those whose existence is affected and radically altered and redetermined by the fact that they receive direction in a particular address of the One who alone is holy. He creates saints by giving them direction. . . . It constitutes itself the ruling and determinative factor in the whole being of those to whom it is given. . . . It is in this way that the Holy One creates the saints. It is in this way that he shares with them, in supreme reality, His own holiness; man's new form of existence as the true covenant-partner of God.[5]

"Yes, their being below is conformable to His above."[6] The drawing of men unto himself is the kingly work of Christ; as such it cannot be called into question.[1]

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[1] IV/1, p. 101.

[2] IV/2, p. 505.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 521.

[5] Ibid., pp. 522-23.

[6] Ibid., p. 529.

The difficulty is, however, that Barth does in fact call into question the possibility of our correspondence with Jesus Christ. Even when man's new form of existence as the true covenant-partner of God is the refrain, there is always a counter-refrain.

> We speak of men who are always sinners like others. . . . Their sanctification takes place here below where there is no action that does not have the marks of sloth or can be anything but displeasing to God. This is true even of their lifting up of themselves, even of their looking to the Lord, which is their action as saints. Who is there who really lifts up his head and looks directly and steadfastly at the One who is the Holy One for us, as we must do if our action is to be well-pleasing to God and to show that we are true covenant-partners of God?[2]

Barth seems to be of two minds on this issue. On the one side he does not want to deny the participation of the saints in the sanctity of Christ, and hence there must be a conformity with Christ in the actual existence of the believer. This is the end which God seeks, the restoration of man as the faithful covenant-partner of God. To deny it would be to deny the efficacy of grace. On the other hand Barth does seem to want to deny it. "They are not differentiated from others by the fact that they are not transgressors in the judgment of God, or that even their good works are not full of transgression."[3]

Furthermore, the continued sinfulness of man is not asserted by Barth merely as a fact. It is required in principle. He implies that it is only the sins of the converted which insure that salvation is by grace alone and not through merit.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 528.

[3] Ibid., p. 592.

> It is evident that there can be no question of any meritoriousness of works, or of any glory in their achievement which can be claimed by or ascribed to the one who performs them. . . . Works can be good only as they declare what God has done and accomplished--the goodness in which He has turned to man and given Himself for him. That works are capable of this declaration does not alter the fact that they are the sinful works of great or little sinners.[1]

In this passage Barth both allows for the possibility of good works which do not prejudice the fact that salvation is by grace and at the same time emphasizes the sinfulness of the doer of such works as if they did.

There is another reason Barth equivocates on the issue of the conformity of the life of the believer to that of Christ. The sanctification of man no less than his justification must be understood to have taken place in Jesus Christ.

> Far too often the matter has been conceived and represented as though His humiliation to death for our justification by Him as our Representative were His own act, but our exaltation to fellowship with God as the corresponding counter-movement, and therefore our sanctification, were left to us, to be accomplished by us.[2]

"Originally and properly" the sanctification of man has taken place in the one man Jesus Christ.[3] The sanctification of man is aliena sanctitate.[4] It applies to us only in participatio Christi. The question, however, is whether Barth is not tempted to impugn the participatio for the sake of securing the aliena character of the Christian's sanctity. To make sure that sanctification applies originally and properly to Jesus Christ Barth sometimes argues as if it applies exclusively to Jesus Christ.

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[1] Ibid., p. 590.

[2] Ibid., p. 516.

[3] Ibid., p. 514.

[4] Ibid., p. 518.

We embarked upon the discussion of this chapter for the sake of developing the theological context in which Christian ethics is treated by Barth. We found the arguments based upon the uninvertibility of the relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man cogent and of decisive importance. We objected, however, to the failure to distinguish between the problems of uninvertibility and sin. Furthermore, we now find that Barth's treatment of sanctification—the actual correspondence to God's will in the life of believers—is not worked out in such a way as to be intelligible. This problem is in evidence in the following passage.

> What ought we to do? If our action were to take place in an awareness of what we are asked with this question, the responsibility before God, fulfilled in our action, would mean our justification before Him. It would be the action of those who are holy in the sense in which God is holy. The will of God would then be realised in our lives in the sense that we had made it our own, and, willing what God wills, we fulfilled it in ourselves. Our decisions would then run parallel to God's decision, and to that extent identical with it. But in this case moral reflection would obviously be superfluous. But so, too, would the command of God as such—as distinct from what we say to ourselves. So, too, would Jesus Christ as the Mediator of the covenant between God and man. Of ourselves we would keep this covenant as faithfully as it is kept by God. But we are not at all saints in this sense. And the relation between God and man is not that of a parallelism and harmony of the divine and human wills, but of an explosive encounter, contradiction and reconciliation, in which it is the part of the divine will to precede and the human to follow, of the former to control and the latter to submit.[1]

Barth appears to make the distinction between divine and human holiness dependent upon some defect in the latter. Without such defect man's holiness would "parallel" (be equal to?) God's. But surely the distinction rests on other grounds. Human holiness consists in correspondence to the divine holiness. God alone is good; whatever else is good is so only insofar as it corresponds to this original good. Human holiness does not imply that the norm is no longer necessary. Quite aside from the question of sin, human holiness differs from the divine in that the latter is good in itself, the former only as a copy, i.e., derivatively. The distinction between original and copy does not require that the latter be a faulty copy. The question is not whether man is in fact holy. One may quite rightly point out that men remain sinners. The objection to Barth is that he thinks that there are theological reasons which make it necessary in principle that man remain a sinner. It is this understanding which is subversive of ethics in any sense. That it does not in fact subvert ethics in Barth is simply the result of an inconsistency which is in one sense fortunate but in another unnecessary and deplorable.

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[1] II/2, p. 644.

We saw in the previous chapter that the concept of obligation views the highest morality open to man as imperfect. Kant accepts this imperfection. Barth could not accept it because on this view obedience consists in less than the correspondence of the whole man. It appeared then that Barth's settlement on the concept rested on his default in the task of finding a more appropriate one. Now, however, it appears that the matter is more fundamental. Whereas before, it appeared that obligation was inadequate even from Barth's own theological standpoint, now it seems that not merely the ethical concept is faulty but the theological content as well. Barth now seems to agree with Kant that human morality is in principle imperfect.

CHAPTER IV

CONTINUITY BETWEEN CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND GENERAL ETHICS IN NIEBUHR

We suggested in the previous chapter that the issue of which concepts are most suitable for Christian ethics depends upon the general understanding of Christian ethics one has as well as upon an analysis of the concepts themselves. We saw that we could not assume that Barth and Niebuhr agree at the level of theological content and disagree merely over the most appropriate thought-form. We turn now to a consideration of the general understanding of Christian ethics which governs Niebuhr's conceptual decisions.

The subtitle of The Responsible Self is "An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy." Niebuhr says that he intends by it "simply that these are the reflections of a Christian who is seeking to understand the mode of his existence and that of his fellow beings as human agents."[1] The inquiry is Christian, he says, because its point of view is that of a Christian believer.[2] Man's fundamental relationship is to God--this is the assumption from which Niebuhr proceeds and not the conclusion to which he wishes to argue. A candid declaration of this assumption, he thinks, does not disqualify the discourse as philosophy or make it more subjective than other philosophies. The latter have their own starting points, which they also argue from and not to. A theistic moral philosophy simply defines its starting point as man's life lived in relation to God in the same way that a naturalistic moral philosophy begins with man as living in and from nature. The double purpose of any ethics is

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 42.

[2] Ibid.

> to obey the ancient and perennial commandment, "Gnothi seauton," "Know thyself"; and to seek guidance for our activity as we decide, choose, commit ourselves, and otherwise bear the burden of our necessary human freedom.[1]

Niebuhr's understanding of a Christian moral philosophy offers a marked contrast with the understanding of Christian ethics found in Barth. In the previous chapter we saw that for Barth Christian ethics is not concerned at all with "ethics" defined as the general inquiry into the goodness or rightness of human behavior.

> Ethics in the sense of that general conception is something entirely different from what alone the Christian doctrine of God can be as a doctrine of God's command. Whatever form the relationship between the two may take, there can be no question either of a positive recognition of Christian ethics by that conception or of an attachment of Christian ethics to it. Christian ethics cannot possibly be its continuation, development and enrichment.[2]

According to Niebuhr's idea of a Christian moral philosophy, the Christian concern with morals has a great deal in common with ethical inquiry as such. All men have to act simply because they are men. Ethics is critical reflection on human agency. Christian moral philosophy differs because of the way it interprets the context in which men must act. That is, Christians understand themselves as having to respond not only to the world but also to God and to the world as the sphere of God's action. In contrast with this Barth holds that Christian ethics cannot begin with man's necessity to act or with human agency as such. Christian ethics begins with the knowledge of God, whence derives the necessity to act in accordance with the requirements of this knowledge. This is the meaning of the subordination of ethics to dogmatics in Barth. The exigencies of the human condition do not define the significance of God for the moral agent, but rather God's significance defines the exigencies of human agency.

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[1] Ibid., p. 48.

[2] II/2, p. 519.

It will be helpful for our understanding of both Niebuhr and Barth if we look at some of Niebuhr's earlier essays. We may first consider an early article by Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology."[1] Value theologies, according to Niebuhr, begin by asking whether values (transcendent or human) are (1) equivalent to God, or (2) require the postulate of God, or (3) offer the criteria by which the experience of God is to be distinguished from other experience.[2] Niebuhr is critical of value theologies on scientific, religious, and philosophical grounds. The theological objection which he makes is that the value theologies have assumed knowledge of a system of values of absolute validity which can be made the basis of religious judgments and employed as a criterion in the analysis of religious experience.

> A theology which begins with values that are logically prior to God or that are of greater value than God, so that what is and what is not God may be determined by reference to them, makes him a means to an end and confounds worship.[3]

The independence of theology as a science is undermined because it is expected to demonstrate the usefulness of religion or of God for man's happiness, his spiritual personality in conflict with nature, or his attempt to realize transcendent values. The critique Niebuhr makes of value theology, however, applies to certain defects in the way it has been pursued; it does not mean that value theology is as such impossible. The contribution of value theology is that it has shown that knowledge of God is possible only in a value relation to him.[1]

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[1] H. Richard Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," The Nature of Religious Experience, ed. Julius Seelye Bixler et al. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), pp. 93-116.

[2] Ibid., p. 95.

[3] Ibid., p. 102.

> It is possible and necessary to interpret religion as an affair of valuation without assuming that such valuation must or can be made on the basis of a previously established standard of values.[2]

An adequate value theology would acknowledge "the relativity of values without prejudice to their objectivity."[3] Value is relative because beings possess value not as an independent quality but in virtue of corresponding to the need of another. It is objective because what determines value is not the desire or consciousness of the needy being but its actual constitution and the constitution of the being which is capable of answering to that need. On this basis then deity-value is defined as the capacity to fulfill the human need for God. The religious question then is, "Which reality has those characteristics which are the foundation of the value of deity, or which fulfill the human need for God?"[4] And the "human need for God" or the religious need is defined as "the need for that which makes life worth living, which bestows meaning on life by revealing itself as the final source of life's being and value."[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 112.

[2] Ibid., pp. 111-12.

[3] Ibid., p. 113.

[4] Ibid., p. 114.

> The task of theology from this point of view lies then in the analysis of these characteristics by virtue of which a being has the value of deity for man, the examination of the reasons for the failure of religions which attach themselves to beings which do not possess these characteristics adequately, and the description of the ultimate being, which as the supremely real and the source of all other being, is alone able by virtue of its character to satisfy the human need for God.[2]

The question which must be asked about Niebuhr's formulation is one which can be based upon his own analysis. Earlier value theologies, beginning with Kant, have one fault in common.

> They assume that men have a knowledge of absolutely valid values which is not only independent of their knowledge of God but which is also in some way determinative of God.[3]

We have already seen that for Niebuhr "to begin with values that are logically prior to God, so that what is and what is not God may be determined by reference to them, makes him a means to an end and confounds worship."[4] But then we are told by Niebuhr that although God exists independently of his creatures, it is not possible to define his deity except in terms of their dependence upon him.[5] But to define value as that which corresponds to a need and deity-value as that which satisfies the human need for God is surely to make the human satisfaction "determinative of God," i.e., the basis upon which what is and what is not God is determined. Niebuhr seems to think that his formulation avoids making the value of human fulfillment prior to God's value by not allowing knowledge of what it takes to fulfill this need prior to the experience of God himself.

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[1] Ibid., p. 115.

[2] Ibid., p. 116.

[3] Ibid., p. 95.

[4] Ibid., p. 102.

[5] Ibid., p. 113.

> Such a value-experience is primitive and original. It deals with that absolute source of all value by relation to which all other things have their value. To analyze this experience by reference to values known and regarded as absolute prior to the experience is to lose sight of this fundamental characteristic and so to falsify it to an extent.[1]

Here Niebuhr attempts to satisfy his own requirement that God's value be logically prior to any other value by making it psychologically prior, in the sense that what is God (i.e., what will satisfy the human need for God) cannot be known prior to the experience of God himself. But even if one does not know what will fulfill the human religious need prior to the experience of God, it is still the capacity to fulfill this need which is the criterion of what is God. And although Niebuhr says that God is experienced as the "absolute source of all value by relation to which all other things have their value," it is nevertheless only in relation to human need that God has his value. Whether one knows (psychologically) what will satisfy the human need for God prior to revelation or not, it is the capacity to satisfy human need which gives God his deity-value; and therefore human fulfillment is the (logically) prior value, the end to which God is a means.

The issue of whether what is and what is not God can be determined in relation to man is what Barth is concerned with when he insists that ethics is subordinate to dogmatics, the knowledge of man to the knowledge of God. At least this is the valid point in Barth's formulation. As Niebuhr's formulation shows, he also is aware of the problem, but then he thinks it can be solved on the epistemological level. One cannot know God's value merely on the basis of a prior assessment of man's needs and then measure God according to this assessment. The assessment of man's needs must undergo revision on the basis of his experience of God. Nevertheless, God's value does rest upon this relationship to human need, even if man can never have a true knowledge of his needs prior to his knowledge of God. This epistemological priority is not equivalent to, nor an adequate surrogate for, the logical priority of God's value. The problem of the dependence of ethics upon dogmatics is not primarily an epistemological problem. Neither is it primarily an ontological problem. We tried to show that the significance of Feuerbach for theology is not the possibility that in reality God may not exist independently of man. It is that the religious relation to him may be conceived by theology as if man were interested in God only on the basis of a prior interest in himself. The problem then is one primarily of religion and of theological concepts which reflect the religious priorities.[1] It is not epistemological or ontological. And strangely enough Niebuhr, who treats it as a problem of religious valuation tries to justify his conception of the value relation at the epistemological level.

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[1] Ibid., p. 115.

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[1] The terms "religious" and "religion" are good illustrations of the problem. Religion has been much maligned in recent Protestant thought. If God is considered significant as the object of this human affection, then it is rightly called into question as falsifying the proper relation. If the human response is considered significant as the response to God then it would seem to be suitable. The issue is one which comes under the rubric of "uninvertibility" which we developed in the last chapter. Whether by religion one means a relation in which the object (God) is important as the object of this human response or whether one means religion which is important as response to this object (God) is the issue.

In the essay "Faith in Gods and in God"[1] Niebuhr says that the question of God can be raised in various ways. It is raised by the philosopher of religion in one way, by the metaphysician in another, and by the Protestant theologian in still another. It is not to be taken for granted that the word has the same meaning in these various inquiries. The theologian, the Protestant theologian at any rate, treats the question of God as a practical matter. It is "a problem of human existence and destiny, of the meaning of human life in general and of the life of self and its community in particular."[2] It is not speculative. It does not ask does God exist, nor what is the first cause or the ultimate substance. Its question is rather, "*How is faith in God possible*?"[3] The theologian is interested in God not from the standpoint of the detached reasoning but from that of the practical reasoning of the existing person.[4] In other words he is interested in God from the point of view of faith—faith, however, "which is not intellectual assent to the truth of certain propositions, but a personal, practical trusting in, reliance on, counting upon something."[5] Not everyone believes in God, but all men have faith in this sense. Belief as assent to propositions is dispensable, but faith is not. Faith as "the reliance upon certain centers of value as able to bestow significance and worth on our existence" is necessary.

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[1] *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 114-26. Essay originally published as "The Nature and Existence of God," *Motive* (December, 1943).

[2] *Ibid*., p. 115.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 116.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] *Ibid*.

> It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives . . . that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning.[1]

To have faith and to have a god are one and the same thing. "We never merely believe that life is worth living, but always think of it as made worth living by something on which we rely. And this being, whatever it be, is properly termed our god."[2] The word god, as the theologian uses it, means "the object of human faith in life's worthwhileness . . ."[3] The problem of God is not disbelief in the existence of God but reliance upon competing gods. Men trust in various causes to supply their life with continuous meaning and value, but none of them suffices. "The causes for which we live all die."[4]

One can agree with Niebuhr that theology treats of God from a practical rather than a speculative point of view. It conducts its inquiry from the standpoint of faith and not as detached mind. But the question must be asked, what is the standpoint of faith. Is not the standpoint of faith attachment to God rather than attachment to life and to whatever makes it worthwhile? To be interested in God from a practical rather than a speculative point of view cannot mean that one is less interested in God than in existence, or interested in God only on the basis of a prior interest in existence. One may rightly hold that the theologian speaks from the standpoint of faith, but faith itself is misrepresented if it is supposed to be attached to God merely as the bestower of meaning on life. Such an attachment to God presupposes a prior attachment to life and values God only as a means to a worthwhile existence. Faith in God certainly does give meaning to existence, but only if the attachment to God is grounded in something other than his giving meaning to existence. Otherwise it is the meaningful existence which is the prior value, and God is only a useful means to this end. It is in this sense then that one quarrels with defining God in relation to faith and not faith in relation to God. God who is God in virtue of making life worthwhile is a lesser God than life, since he is only a means to its worthwhileness. To define faith in relation to God would mean that faith is an attachment to God for what God is in himself and not for what he does for man and that the meaning he does give to life follows from the prior attachment to him on this other basis. This is the very opposite of saying that God is only God as "the object of faith in life's worthwhileness."

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[1] _Ibid._, p. 118.

[2] _Ibid._, p. 119.

[3] _Ibid._

[4] _Ibid._, p. 112.

We may consider the same matter again on the basis of an essay by Niebuhr entitled "Toward a New Other-Worldliness."[1] Man, Niebuhr says, is a creature of two worlds, and if he tries to make his home in one of these worlds alone something goes wrong with him.

> The temporal goods which satisfy a temporal being do not satisfy man or correspond to his nature. . . . That earth is not enough for him his adventures, his crimes and glories on earth demonstrate.[2]

Niebuhr's attempt to arrive at a "new other-worldliness" is essentially a critique of one-worldly Christianity, whether the one world be the temporal, to the exclusion of the eternal, or vice versa. The old other-worldliness has been rejected as too contemptuous of this world. But an exclusively this-worldly Christianity is no wiser than the view which it seeks to supplant. A new other-worldliness would realize that neither of these one-worldly views is adequate. The need for the other world can be shown from an analysis of man himself. Temporal goods alone do not satisfy nor correspond to his nature. More than this, however, consideration of the eternal need not imply renunciation of the temporal world.

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[1] Theology Today, I (April, 1944), pp. 78-87.

[2] Ibid., p. 78.

> As Prof. Lovejoy has said in The Great Chain of Being, "There is perhaps nothing so favorable to success in this world's business as a high degree of emotional detachment from it." But without attachment to other goods detachment from this worldly concern is not possible.[1]

Niebuhr realizes, of course, that the implication of Lovejoy's statement may be mischievous. Eternity is not something that can be known for the sake of the goods of this world. "All the goods of the world may be added to those who seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness but none of them seems to be available to us so long as we seek the kingdom for the sake of having these goods."[2] If the new other-worldliness does not despise this present temporal world, neither can it seek the eternal for the sake of the temporal.

> What is needed, then, is a new other-worldliness, a new pre-occupation with the super-natural, with the transcendent God and the community of souls in him. And this pre-occupation needs must be directed to the Eternal for its own sake alone. It needs to be an intellectual pre-occupation producing a theological science comparable in honesty in intensity and detachment from self to the science which pre-occupation with nature produces.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 83.

[2] Ibid., p. 86.

[3] Ibid.

The problem is that although Niebuhr sees that the eternal must be sought for its own sake this position is incompatible with the starting place he has chosen. The question of eternity is raised by Niebuhr in the first place on the basis of an analysis of man and his needs. The acknowledgment that the eternal cannot be sought for the sake of the temporal ought to include the recognition that neither can it be approached originally from the standpoint of satisfying human needs. What Niebuhr has done is to demonstrate the breakdown of his own procedure. He has called for a pre-occupation with God for his own sake, but nowhere has his own procedure reflected such a beginning point. On the contrary, he has said, as we have seen, that the religious question is which reality can fulfill the human need for God. And he has defined God as the object upon which we rely to give meaning to human existence. Niebuhr says that the Protestant theologian does not raise the question of God in a detached, speculative way. He deals with the question in faith, and faith is not intellectual assent to dogmatic propositions but the "reliance upon certain centers of value as able to bestow significance and worth on our existence." He distinguishes theology from speculation on the basis of the personal interestedness of the former and the detachment of the latter, but in doing so he fails to provide for that "detachment from self" which he requires above. In showing the interestedness of theology he does not preserve the distinction between interest and self-interest.

Finally, in The Meaning of Revelation Niebuhr attributes to Schleiermacher and Ritschl a renewal of the understanding of Luther that theological knowledge is the knowledge of faith. For God and faith belong together. Schleiermacher and Ritschl were right to insist that theological knowledge begins in faith. The difficulty with Schleiermacher, Niebuhr says, is that he did not actually do his theology from the beginning point which he had defined. He substituted the feeling of absolute dependence as the object of theology, "so directing the attention of faith toward itself rather than toward God."[1] In Schleiermacher's successors this "subjectivistic inversion" amounted to "the ascription to religion of all the attributes which religion itself would ascribe to God."[2] As a result God is supplanted as the object of concern and the source of strength and religion takes his place. Ritschl, on the other hand, errs in a slightly different direction, according to Niebuhr. Beginning with the relation of man to God as a value relation, he imposes a prior value relation, the relation of man to nature, so that God is valued as the being which sustains man's superiority over nature.

> So Ritschl approached God not from the point of view of Christian faith which values God as infinitely superior to man and the source of whatever real value man himself has, but rather from the standpoint of man's confidence in his own worth as superior to nature. Hence the deity Ritschl began to speak of was again not the God of Christian faith but the being or beings which support man's confidence in himself as a supernatural being. This being was an instrument, not an end; it was the counterpart of man's sense of freedom not of his sense of absolute dependence . . .[3]

It appears that in these criticisms Niebuhr has made the essential point. Even though theology is knowledge in faith, faith does not thereby displace God as the object of theological knowledge, as it appears to do in Schleiermacher. Nor is the standpoint of faith upheld when Ritschl treats God as the being who maintains man's superiority over nature. The problem is that even after these apparently sound criticisms of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, Niebuhr does not avoid the problem in his own formulation. Some pages later in The Meaning of Revelation he describes faith:

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[1] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 27.

[2] Ibid., p. 28.

[3] Ibid., pp. 30-31.

> As long as a man lives he must believe in something for the sake of which he lives; without belief in something that makes life worth living man cannot exist. . . . Man as a practical, living being never exists without a god or gods; some things there are to which he must cling as the sources and goals of his activity, the centers of value.[1]

Like Schleiermacher—at least like the Schleiermacher Niebuhr criticizes—Niebuhr has confused beginning in faith with beginning with faith. That is, he seems to have made faith the original object of his theology and defined God from the knowledge of faith. And like Ritschl he has grounded God's significance in the fact that he fulfills some human need, implying no less than Ritschl that it is man's existence which is the prior value and that God has value as contributing to this end. As we earlier suggested, God who is God in virtue of satisfying some requirement of human existence is a lesser God than human existence. Even though it is acknowledged that man is the needy being and God his ultimate resource, the theologian has represented man as being concerned with God only on the basis of a prior concern for his own existence. As Niebuhr quite rightly pointed out in his strictures against Ritschl, God is treated as a means to the human end.

The analysis of these essays gives us some insight into the issue of the continuity between Christian and other ethics. The general conception of ethics takes up the matter of human conduct independently.

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[1] Ibid., p. 77.

It is interested in human agency for itself. Niebuhr defines ethics as the quest for self-knowledge and for guidance for our activity. Now Barth's point is that the presupposition of such an independent inquiry is man's interest in himself. Whether it turns out to be broadly humanistic or narrowly egoistic, its first concern is with man. It may even be theistic, but since its foundation is man's interest in himself, the presupposition of the interest in God is man's interest in himself. God comes in for consideration insofar as it is essential to man's own self-concern.[1] Consider the kind of statements we saw Niebuhr make in the essays treated above: The religious question is which being can satisfy the human need for God; God is the object of faith in life's worthwhileness; earth is not enough to satisfy man; and finally, man cannot live without something to live for. Each statement reflects the fact that man's interest in God is based upon a prior interest in himself. This is what Barth means by an independent ethics; and by definition Christian ethics cannot be continuous with such a conception, not because it has an interest in man but because this interest is the basis of whatever interest it has in anything else.[2] For this reason Barth says that such a general conception of ethics corresponds exactly with the conception of sin. Naturally Christian existence must be contrary to what is here conceptualized.

To avoid the dilemmas that Niebuhr falls into, Barth maintains that Christian ethics is dependent upon and subordinate to dogmatics.

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[1] Cf. Barth's critique of gnothi seauton, II/2, p. 540.

[2] It is no necessary part of this position that self-love is immoral, sinful, or un-Christian. For my own view, one can certainly talk about an appropriate self-love. The only insistence is that self-love not be made the basis for whatever else the self loves.

It arises out of dogmatics and not out of an independent consideration of human agency. Critical attention is paid to the self and its conduct because of the attachment to God; otherwise it has its basis in the self's attachment to itself.

Niebuhr is aware of the position from which Barth's critique is made and he appears to reject it for several reasons. The first has to do with the apparent exclusivism of the method. Niebuhr interprets Christian ethics as an ethic of life and trust rather than of death and fear. He does not make the claim, however, that trust and reconciliation are realized only in the lives of Christians, or that the lives of Christians are always or even mostly characterized by such trust and reconciliation.

> It is of course too much to say that the ethics of Christians is the ethics of the reconciled, or that their interpretations of life and death and neighbors have all passed through metanoia. For we who call ourselves by Christ's name recognize the presence in ourselves of the responses of distrust, of the ethics of death, as well as the movement toward life. . . . That is one of the reasons why we do not know whether to call our self-interpretation Christian or simply human. Though we speak of our reconciliation to God, we share so much of the defensive, anxious, distrustful attitude toward being that we cannot put common human ethics of unbelief in life on one side, as though it were something apart from us, as though its theory were unknown to us. And on the other hand we do not fail to note that among our companions who refuse to take the name of Christian responses to action are made that seem to be informed by the trust, the love of all being, the hope in the open future, that have become possible to us only in our life with Jesus Christ, and in the presence of the One whom he encountered in all his encounters and to whom he gave fitting answer in all his answers to his companions.[1]

Here then is the first stake that Niebuhr has in the question of the continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics, and his resistence to the idea that ethics is based upon dogmatics. Beyond the divergences of theory, there is a similarity of conduct—both good and bad—between Christians and non-Christians. To say that ethics is dependent upon dogmatics implies that Christians have a monopoly upon goodness. To say that the general conception of ethics is exactly equivalent to the Christian conception of sin makes it even worse. It is possible, however, to point to passages in Barth which parallel Niebuhr's above. Barth does not say that the Christian life is discontinuous with other modes of human existence. He quite explicitly allows that Christian conduct is not wholly different from the conduct of non-Christians. Barth seems to suggest here that it is only the scientific theory of ethics which is discontinuous with the general conception of ethics. He appears to allow that there is even non-Christian conduct which is not adequately conceptualized by the general conception of ethics, the conception which is the same as the Christian conception of sin. A distinction is made between ethics as the theory of morals and morality itself or actual human conduct. The discontinuity is between the Christian theory and the theory of the general conception and not necessarily between Christian conduct and the conduct of non-Christians. Barth also allows for the possibility of a nontheological ethics which is not alien to Christian ethics and which is spoken of as "'Christian' in a loose sense."[1] Such an ethic will not be academic or scientific, since it could not be so without dealing with presuppositions, in the course of which it would become theological ethics.

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 144.

> It does not attempt to draw up expressly and specifically any basic principles. It is content to show by its actual handling of the problems of human life that the Christian knowledge of God is its presupposition and that it does, in fact, derive from this. It

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[1] II/2, p. 542.

> stands in a sense halfway between theology and the Christian life itself. For it has heard the Word of God attested in Scripture and in the preaching of the Christian Church, or it shows actual traces of the dominion of that Word over all men.[1]

The presupposition of a true ethic is still the knowledge of God, and thus ethics as a scientific discipline must be dependent upon dogmatics. Even right conduct among non-Christians requires knowledge of God, and Barth allows for "actual traces of the dominion of that Word over all men," as the presupposition of "Christian" conduct among non-Christians. Barth may have a problem here, insofar as right conduct among non-Christians presupposes a knowledge of God apart from that attested in the Scripture and in the preaching of the Christian church. Such knowledge would seem to imply either a natural knowledge of God or other revelations. But if Barth does have a problem here, the exclusivism which causes it is not the principle that the knowledge of man's existence and conduct is dependent upon the knowledge of God. It derives rather from the question of the existence of the knowledge of God apart from historical Christianity. There is nothing exclusivistic about the first principle, and there is no necessary connection between it and the latter.

A second objection Niebuhr has to making ethics dependent upon dogmatics has to do with the fact that for Barth this means "beginning with God." The phrase implies for Niebuhr the presumption that Christians see things from God's point of view.[2] There is some justification for attributing this view to Barth. He says that other ethics represents the attempt of man to give himself a human answer to the question of the good; but Christian ethics, ethics based upon dogmatics, is "divine ethics."[1] The true significance of Barth's position that Christian ethics is dependent upon dogmatics, however, is the insistence that the original and primary object of theology is God. It is in this sense that theology "begins with God." And if it is not interested in man from God's point of view it is interested in man from the standpoint of its interest in God. The interest theology has in man is not an independent self-interest; it derives from and is dependent upon its interest in God. It is in this sense that Barth rightly maintains the dependence of ethics upon dogmatics. And since the general understanding of ethics is defined by its beginning from an interest in human agency as such, Christian ethics cannot be conceived of as continuous with it in this sense.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Cf. James M. Gustafson, Introduction to The Responsible Self, p. 15.

A third reason Niebuhr rejects the dependence of ethics upon dogmatics is that it implies to him that religious knowledge is purely theoretical first and that this theoretical knowledge then becomes the basis of ethics. On Niebuhr'~~s~~ view this misconstrues the nature both of dogmatics and of ethics. In the first place Niebuhr denies that religious knowledge can ever be independent of (and prior to) the decision of the personal agent and hence independent of ethics. Theological knowledge is always the knowledge of faith and never merely disinterested knowledge. Theology is inseparably connected with faith.[2] And faith is not to be identified with belief.

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[1] II/2, p. 518.

[2] Radical Monotheism, p. 12.

> Such faith may be described in various ways, but it is never correctly described when it is initially defined in terms of intellectual belief. The belief that something exists is an experience of a wholly different order from the experience of reliance on it. The faith we speak of in Protestantism and of which, it seems to us, the classic book of Christianity, the Bible, speaks, is not intellectual assent to the truth of certain propositions, but a personal, practical trusting in, reliance on, counting on something.[1]

It is inconceivable to Niebuhr that dogmatics can be prior to ethics because theology is the knowledge of faith, and faith is not belief in propositions before it is trust and confidence. Such trust and confidence are themselves acts of personal agents and therefore already "ethical." In his treatment of revelation Niebuhr says:

> The obscurities which it explains are not those which bother us as observers of life but those which distress moral agents and suffers. To use Pascal's phrase here, it is the heart and not the head which finds its reason in revelation.[2]

On Niebuhr's view then dogmatics cannot be prior to ethics, since religious knowledge itself is never simply theoretical reason but always practical, i.e., ethical, reason. It is not merely the act of a mind conceiving and defining but a self, i.e., an agent, deciding and committing itself in its interpretations.[3]

Niebuhr's point seems to be that one cannot ignore the ethical in faith itself and therefore in the knowledge of faith, i.e., theology or dogmatics. We should now compare this with Barth's position that ethics is dependent upon, and subordinate to, dogmatics. The statement that ethics is dependent upon dogmatics does give the impression that dogmatics is not itself ethical knowledge, since ethics only follows from dogmatics. Closer examination, however, will disclose that Barth does not necessarily deny what Niebuhr here asserts. The priority of dogmatics over ethics in Barth does not mean that knowledge of God ever occurs except in the relationship of faith, which is ethical in Niebuhr's sense of involving human agency. What Barth does claim is that the knowledge of God is not of interest to theology because it is ethical, i.e., because of some independent "know thyself." Even if knowledge of God does only derive from a relationship which is ethical, theology is not in the first place interested in the human agency involved but in the object of the relationship, namely God. The human self as the subject of this experience is necessarily present from the beginning and present not merely as epistemological subject but also ethical agent. Even so it does not follow that theology ought to focus its attention first on this aspect of the matter. For theology to do so would not reflect the priorities present in the relationship itself. The faithful man is not concerned primarily with his own faith but with God, even if God is not present to him apart from faith. It is in this sense that dogmatics is prior to ethics.

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[1] "Faith in Gods and in God," p. 116.

[2] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 94.

[3] Cf. The Responsible Self, p. 59; The Meaning of Revelation, p. 94.

No one has made this latter point better than Niebuhr himself. To direct attention away from the object to the act of the subject in relation to the object is called by him "moralism" or "religionism."

> Moralism loves the love of neighbor, but morality loves the neighbor; moralism loves the love of truth, but morality loves the truth; . . . moralism loves the good will, but the good will loves the good. Similarly aestheticism loves the love of beauty, or the emotions which the beautiful inspires, but the art loves beauty. So also what, by analogy, we may call religionism loves the love of God, whereas religion loves God. Religionism prizes religion either as an intrinsically valuable thing or because it promotes

> the values of the ethical, political or economic life; religion, however, subordinates itself and all these other values to God.[1]

Ethics is subordinate to dogmatics for precisely the reasons Niebuhr himself points to here. The passage, however, has implications more far-reaching than Niebuhr realizes. Theology is interested in God for his own sake first. Its interest in its own faith and its faithfulness only arises out of this prior interest in God. Surely this means that one can proceed to describe God as the being who satisfies the human need for God (as Niebuhr does in this same essay, cf. above p. 94) only by completely reversing the priorities and grounding the human interest in God in faith's needs. Secondly, it means, as Barth rightly maintains, that the concern for the human agent which derives from this prior concern for God cannot be considered simply continuous with ethics which is grounded only in the human concern for man's own agency. Barth quite rightly points out that such an independent view of ethics, having begun thus, can never arrive at God as he is known in Christian faith, since it is interested in God only on the basis of a prior concern with human agency and not in God for his own sake.

Again, Niebuhr himself has made the same point. Theology is not a disinterested inquiry since it is not concerned with God theoretically but as apprehended by a "willing, feeling, responding self."[2] But the interest of theology ought to be that of faith itself and not an alien interest.

> Theology may try to maintain the standpoint of Christian faith, that is of an interest directed as exclusively as possible to the God of Christian faith; or it may take the position of faith in some other being, that is of an interest directed more or less

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[1] "Value Theory and Theology," pp. 103-104.

[2] The Meaning of Revelation, p. 35.

> exclusively toward religion, or toward the moral consciousness, or toward man's own worth, or toward civilization. . . . And when such theology turns to the latter being from the point of view of its dominant faith in another valued entity it does not really turn to the Christian God at all as the Christian faith knows him, but rather to some instrumental value which serves its major interest.[1]

Now it is this very point which is so telling against Niebuhr himself in the issue of the continuity of Christian ethics with ethics considered from the standpoint of human agency as such. It is precisely Barth's point that in the attempt to introduce God after having begun with human agency as the original object, in Niebuhr's own words, one "does not really turn to the Christian God at all as Christian faith knows him . . ." Unfortunately, the apparently clear conception of the problem does not prevent Niebuhr from committing what he has already defined as the false move even in The Meaning of Revelation. Thus he says:

> Man as a practical, living being never exists without a god or gods; some things there are to which he must cling as the sources and goals of his activity, the centers of value. . . . Without such a faith men might exist, but not as selves. Being selves they as surely have something for which to live as selves as being rational they have objects to understand.[2]

The truth of this statement is not in question. What is in question is the assumption that the interest in God from the standpoint of the necessity of human existence is equivalent to faith's interest in God.

The question between Barth and Niebuhr is whether Christian ethics is continuous with ethics as generally defined. Barth holds that Christian ethics cannot be a species falling under such a general definition of ethics. The reason is that the latter treats ethics from the standpoint of an interest in human agency as such. If it is theistic, even purportedly Christian, it considers God on the basis of this prior concern with human agency. True Christian ethics, however, is concerned first of all with God and only on the basis of that with human agency. Niebuhr says that Christian ethics considers man in relation to God. A theistic moral philosophy is one which "takes as its starting point man's existence as lived in relation to God, as a naturalistic moral philosophy begins with man as living in and from nature."[1] The general definition of ethics which he assumes, however, is one which takes the purpose of ethics to be that of seeking self-knowledge and guidance for our activity "as we decide, choose, commit ourselves, and otherwise bear the burden of our necessary human freedom." (Cf. above, p. 87.) The objection from Barth's point of view is that Christian ethics insofar as it is considered as falling under this general definition does not really take for its starting point man's existence as lived in relation to God. The beginning point of Niebuhr's general definition is man in relation to his own necessity to decide, his own "necessary human freedom."

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[1] Ibid., pp. 35-36.

[2] Ibid., pp. 78-79.

We should not be taken to mean that the implications drawn from Niebuhr's statements are what he intends. On the contrary, we hold that they are unfortunate and unintended, but nevertheless necessary, consequences. That Niebuhr desires, no less than Barth, to make the sovereignty of God primary is proved by the numerous occasions in which our critique has been able to condemn him out of his own mouth. The point is that in execution Niebuhr's position is frequently not as good as his intention. In this respect our procedure is one of criticizing Niebuhr internally and not merely from Barth's point of view, though the insight for the criticism derives from Barth.

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[1] The Responsible Self, p. 44.

We have pursued Niebuhr relentlessly on this matter because it appears to be a serious unresolved problem in his theology. Furthermore the critique shows clearly the extent of the validity in Barth's approach. But this is by no means the end of the matter. What we have done is to show that one approach to the question of the continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics is a dead-end. Whether a different tack might not successfully be taken is still an open question. Furthermore, the significance of the matter for the question of the most suitable conceptual form for Christian ethics remains to be considered.

If, as we propose, Niebuhr is as committed to the sovereignty of God as Barth, why does he consistently imperil it in his theology? Why does he consider it necessary to show a continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics? The answer seems to be that the persistent attempt to show a continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics in Niebuhr derives from his commitment to the view that there is an identity between faith and moral or practical reason. Niebuhr refuses to regard faith as a mere theoretical knowing. It is practical; it provides the orientation for life and as such determines conduct. This is true in the case of Christian faith. But it must also be true in the case of other moral positions. Conduct for them is also determined by their basic outlook, by their response at the level of faith. It is this fact, that ultimately all ethics is a matter of faith,that underlies Niebuhr's commitment to the continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics. As long as he attempts to show the continuity by defining faith in terms of practical reason he is in trouble. Faith is interpreted as a relation to any object of trust and loyalty which gives meaning and direction to life. This understanding makes for continuity between faith as a relation to the adequate object of trust and loyalty and faith as a relation to other, inadequate objects. But it does so at the price of falsifying faith's own understanding of its relation to God. This latter is misrepresented if it is thought to be for the sake of providing meaning and direction to life, for in that case human existence and not God is the prior value. This conception of the continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics is invalid, but it does not follow that the idea of a continuity as such is impossible. We have suggested that Niebuhr's interest in the problem derives from his concern for showing how faith functions as practical reason. We have criticized Niebuhr's view of the identity between faith and practical reason from the point of view of Barth's principle of uninvertibility. But assuming the uninvertibility of the relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man or between faith and practical or moral reason, there is still a kind of identity or coincidence, though we must understand practical reason from faith as the knowledge of God and not vice versa.

The theory of the responsible self has been considered on the basis of certain prefatory statements about the relationship between Christian moral philosophy and general ethics. An examination of the treatment of the problem in the concrete development of the theory, as distinct from the abstract statements of prolegomena, reveals a somewhat different approach. Here Niebuhr has laid the groundwork for a more adequate understanding of the continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics. The continuity rests upon the fact that all ethics ultimately derives from an interpretation of a common object, God, or the One in the many. The interpretation may be one of trust or of distrust; but in either case it is the response to the same object, though differently understood. The continuity is not between faith in God and faith in some other object, resting upon the fact that they both fulfill some function in human existence. It rests rather upon the fact that trust and distrust are both responses to what is objectively one reality, though subjectively it is understood differently. In each case conduct is determined by one's interpretation of the One power which is inescapable. Whether that power, the Determiner of Destiny, is understood as the Friend or as the Enemy, that is the issue of faith. And the fundamental issue of ethics--whether one has an ethics of trust or distrust--is decided at this level. Further, the question of faith is not decided in a separate religious sphere with implications extending to one's other conduct, but rather faith is a continuous response to the One in the many. Ethical choices are themselves responses of faith or faithlessness. Here Niebuhr has a coincidence between faith and practical reason which defines the latter in terms of the former, and as such it appears not to contravene Barth's principle of uninvertibility.

In his preliminary statements Niebuhr defines ethics as continuous with an independent inquiry into self-understanding and appears to make the understanding of God derive from a general interest in man's self-knowledge. But in the actual development of the theory of responsibility, ethics as practical self-understanding depends upon one's interpretation of the Other. The whole emphasis upon the social nature of man insists that self-understanding (and even self-existence, the existence of selves as selves) depends upon the understanding of the other—other selves, and ultimately God, either as hostile fate or the giver and preserver of life.

We do not suggest that in the theory of responsibility Niebuhr has overcome the problem which persistently plagues his theology. There is some indication, however, that the theory itself is not bound to the suspect way of conceiving a coincidence between Christian ethics and other ethics. The theory of responsibility appears to contain within it the possibility of a more adequate conception of such a continuity. More important, it reveals that the basis of Niebuhr's concern for the continuity rests upon his prior concern for showing a coincidence between faith and ethics. The importance of achieving the conceptualization of a coincidence between faith and ethics will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

FAITH AND MORALS

Niebuhr's position on the continuity between Christian ethics and other ethics is dictated by his view that there is a coincidence between faith and morals.[1] What this means is that faith is practical knowledge; it necessarily leads to certain modes of conduct. Faith and fitting conduct necessarily coincide, as do distrust and unfitting conduct. They do not vary independently. We have tried to show that Barth does not deny this coincidence between faith and morals. The knowledge of God for Barth is necessarily practical knowledge which determines human conduct. All that Barth insists upon is that morality or practical reason be understood from the knowledge of God and not vice versa. The coincidence between faith and morals is Niebuhr's primary concern. If he is not entirely successful in treating the issue at the abstract level, there is still the question of the significance of the issue for the concepts of obligation and responsibility. It is possible to show that Barth does not intend to deny a coincidence between faith and morals. But does he succeed in achieving it in practice; more specifically, is the concept of obligation consistent with it? The object of this present chapter is to see what is involved in the idea of a coincidence between faith and morals and to inquire how obligation is to be judged in the light of this question.

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[1] It is acknowledged that the meaning of the phrase "a coincidence between faith and morals" will not be entirely clear initially. The intention is, however, that it will become increasingly clear through the chapter.

Barth claims that there is a coincidence between dogmatics and ethics. The coincidence in theology reflects the coincidence in the object of theology, i.e., that between the Word of God as gospel and as law. It is not merely a matter of theological science. Gospel and law coincide in theology, as dogmatics and ethics, because they coincide in themselves as two aspects of the one Word of God.

> The Law is completely enclosed in the Gospel. It is not a second thing alongside and beyond the Gospel. It is not a foreign element which precedes or only follows it. It is the claim which is addressed to us by the Gospel itself and as such, the Gospel in so far as it has the form of a claim addressed to us, the Gospel which we cannot really hear except as we obey it.[1]

The interpretation of the law as the form of the gospel means that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of right conduct occur together. The former is the basis of the latter, but the two coincide since the one does not occur without the other. But more is implied in the coincidence of law and gospel than just this joint occurrence of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of what we ought to do. Beyond the fact that knowledge of God is the basis of ethical knowledge, there is also implied that the knowledge of God is the source of the actual motivation to correspond in one's being and conduct to the Word of God. "As the one Word of God, which is the revelation and work of His grace, disposes of man, it is also the impulse directing him to a future that is in keeping with this 'disposing.'"[2] The ethical knowledge which is included in the knowledge of the Word of God is not a neutral, uncommitted knowledge of right conduct. It is a knowledge which includes already a disposing of oneself corresponding to his divine election and the divine disposition.

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[1] II/2, p. 557.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 512.

To know the law of God therefore is not merely to stand neutral before a requirement. The interpretation of the law as the form of the gospel means that one never confronts God's law neutrally. One either knows it as the "form of the gospel" and therefore as the mode of God's grace, in which case he is positively disposed toward it and moved to consent to it. Or one knows it as the law of sin and death, in which case there is no possibility of consent to it, at least according to its true spirit. The law then cannot be the kind of thing about which one must make up his mind, i.e., whether to obey or disobey. One has true knowledge of the law—as distinguished from the misuse in which it becomes the law of sin and death—only as a hearer of the gospel, and hence as one who knows himself as elect and sanctified in Jesus Christ. Except as one obeys, he has not truly heard the gospel. Here then is the further implication of the coincidence between gospel and law. There is the coincidence between knowledge of God and moral knowledge. But beyond this there is also a coincidence between moral knowledge (the knowledge of the Word of God as law) and moral agency (obedience) or, as we may say, between hearing and doing the Word.

Barth has said that we cannot really hear the gospel except as we obey it. He makes this aspect more explicit when he says that obedience and faith begin as we hear, and ungodliness begins with our not hearing.[1] Obedience or disobedience is acknowledged to be a function of the awareness or unawareness of the divine command respectively. The awareness of the command itself already includes a consent to the Word of God. Nor is Barth content to stop with the assertion that obedience "begins" with our hearing and ungodliness with our not hearing, as if hearing were one part of obedience and the decision to obey something which might vary independently. Ultimately Barth asserts an exact coincidence between the moral determination of self ("obedience") and the apprehension ("hearing") of the command.

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[1] Ibid., p. 670.

> It is in this radical way that we are here called to decision, and it is made quite impossible for us to choose disobedience and reject faith and repentance. For in the decision in which we are here placed by the word spoken we have no choice. The demand issued by this fact, the demand of Jesus Christ, is such that every other choice but obedience is cut off. If we hear it, this is definitely the case. . . . When we obey we do the only thing we are free to do; the thing that we can do only in real freedom. Disobedience is not a choice, but the incapacity of the man who is no longer or not yet able to choose in real freedom. So majestic and penetrative is the call of Jesus Christ that when it is heard as such, when we know and discern that it is He who calls, it is irresistible . . .[1]

For one who hears there is not even the possibility of disobedience, and one who disobeys has not heard at all. The talk about "irresistibility," with its connotations of a mechanical determinism, is misleading and unnecessary according to our interpretation. The theory of the law as the form of the gospel includes the assertion that grace is the basis of the divine claim. To experience the command of God means that one is already responding to the gospel as such. It means that one is grateful in response to God's graciousness and experiences God's law as the mode of his grace. For the command to be "irresistible" cannot mean that one is moved from a state of neutrality before God's claim to a state of conformity to it as by an inexorable force. Hearing the command at all involves the positive response to the Word of God. The command of God does not admit of a choice because one never hears it as a neutral observer but only in commitment to it. Obedience is made "so natural and self-evident" because the moral determination is no longer an open question when one is confronted by the command of God. That determination is made in the response to the Word of God as gospel, apart from which one does not hear the command of God.

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[1] _Ibid._, p. 779.

The concern for the coincidence between faith and morals which we found to be primary in Niebuhr certainly finds its place in Barth. If our interpretation of the theory of the law as the form of the gospel is correct this is exactly what it is all about. The important question, however, is whether the concept of obligation is consistent with Barth's understanding of the law as the form of the gospel. Obligation implies that moral determination consists in a decision which must be made subsequent to and on the basis of the knowledge of an ought. According to this view, one is first aware of a command which then requires of him a decision whether to obey or disobey. It is this decision which constitutes moral agency.

> No, my decision—the human ethical decision—is whether in my conduct I shall correspond to the command which encounters and confronts me in the most concrete and pointed way, whether I shall be obedient or disobedient to it, whether I, for my part, shall meet it according to my election (the election of Jesus Christ) as a believer or an unbeliever.[1]

The idea of the moral act in this passage is quite different from that we found implied in Barth's theory of gospel and law. Here, given the knowledge of the command, there is still an ethical decision to be made

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 669.

--whether to obey or disobey. And apparently this decision can vary quite independently of the knowledge of the command. The obedient hear the command and obey; the disobedient likewise hear but disobey. In the theory of the law as the form of the gospel it is the gospel which is the source and basis of the command. Only through the positive response to the gospel is the claim of God truly apprehended. How then can the matter of whether to obey or disobey still be considered an open question, as it is in the above passage? The passages we considered earlier were conspicuous by the fact that they did not treat the matter as an open question. Given the hearing of the command, one did not still have to decide for obedience as against disobedience. As Barth put it, "It is in this radical way that we are here called to decision, and it is made quite impossible for us to choose disobedience." This statement is in keeping with the rest of Barth's theory of the law as the form of the gospel. If one only comes to the law through the gospel, naturally there is no possibility of choosing disobedience. The reason is simple: one knows the claim only insofar as he is already committed to the gospel. The only puzzling thing is that Barth attempts to talk about a "decision" in which there is "no choice." The conclusion to be drawn is that he is not talking about a decision at all, at least not about a decision whether or not to obey. That determination is already made; it occurs as one either hears or does not hear the Word of God as gospel and as law. In our own formulation we may describe Barth's position as this: The knowledge of God is the correspondence of our mind or cognition to the Word of God. Response to the Word of God, however, is never a purely cognitive affair. It includes the correspondence of our being and conduct as well. This two-fold nature of response to God reflects the two-fold nature of the Word of God itself as gospel and law. It is not two separate responses. The response is one, just as its object is one. Each has two aspects, but in both cases they are inseparable.

The terms for these two aspects in the response to the Word of God are faith and obedience. That these two are not separable is indicated in the fact that Barth can speak of the content of faith as obedience and the content of obedience as believing. Faith can be used to refer to the cognitive aspect of the relation to God. But it also has a more comprehensive usage which includes obedience. In this latter sense it is neither a mere knowing nor is it morality apart from knowledge of God. It is the "whole life-act of the Christian seen from a particular standpoint."[1] We propose to examine what Barth says about faith as the life-act of the Christian to test our interpretation of the law as the form of the gospel and our judgment that the concept of obligation is inconsistent with it. We are not interested here in a systematic account of all that Barth says about faith or in considering all the questions that he is concerned with in his treatment in various places in the Church Dogmatics. We want only to see one point, *viz*., the unity of the act, the coincidence and inseparability of its cognitive and ethical aspects.

Faith, Barth says, is "following its object."[2] It is first of all cognitive in character, "the simple taking cognisance of the preceding being and work of Jesus Christ."[3] This cognitive character is emphasized by the fact that the terms Barth proposes for the various movements of faith—acknowledgment, recognition, and confession—are all forms of Kennen (Anerkennen, Erkennen, and Bekennen). Faith is related to its object as cognition, and as such it is objective and theoretical knowledge.[1] But faith is more than cognition.

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[1] IV/1, p. 731.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 742.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 758.

> [Faith is the act of the Christian life] to the extent that in all the activity and individual acts of a man it is the most inward and central and decisive act of his heart, the one which—if it takes place—characterises them all as Christian, as expressions and confirmations of his Christian freedom, his Christian responsibility, his Christian obedience.[2]

Whatever a man does in faith he does rightly from the Christian point of view, and whatever is not of faith is sin.[3] Faith as the Christian act, the act of the Christian life, "embraces and controls all individual acts and activities, permeating and determining them like the leaven of Mt. 13:33."[4] Thus acknowledgment, the first of the three aspects of faith according to Barth's scheme, is defined by him as obedience and compliance. "All true knowledge of God," Barth quotes Calvin, "(omnis recta Dei cognitio) is born of obedience."[5] The knowledge of faith, which is theoretical, is at the same time practical. The knowing about Jesus Christ includes from the very first a knowing about the believer himself.

> It is already included in the root of faith as the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ, it is born of that obedience as cognition, that the One in whom I believe and about whom I can know when I believe

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[1] Ibid., p. 765.

[2] Ibid., pp. 757-58.

[3] Ibid., p. 758.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., p. 761.

> in Him, that this One . . . is what He is and does what He does for me, *pro me*; that He is "my Lord," as Luther so rightly emphasised . . .[1]

The knowledge of faith is necessarily more than theoretical since "it reaches out from that knowledge to the awareness, the self-understanding, and self-apprehension, of the whole man, thus becoming an action and decision of the whole man."[2] It is then "existential knowledge" and "the act of my heart."

> What follows from the fact that the recognition of faith is a knowledge of the believer—an active knowledge about Jesus Christ which is personal and moves him—is obviously this, that he has to shape his existence, or more exactly, his understanding and apprehension of his existence, his attitude to himself and the world, in a way which is in some sense parallel to the One who as his Lord took his place, that he has to model himself in conformity with the One in whom he believes, that he can and will be man only in the likeness of Jesus Christ as the One who died and rose again for him.[3]

Nothing is clearer than the coincidence in this understanding of faith between the cognitive and the ethical elements, the theoretical and the practical. According to Barth the ethical element or obedience is an essential aspect of faith. The movement of man to obedience does not require an exercise of will beyond the act of faith. There is no act of faith which does not already include the correspondence of human emotion and volition as well as of the intellect to its object.

> Paul never even dreamed of the kind of *pistis* envisaged and criticised in Jas. 2:14-26—the faith which has no *erga*, which is inactive, which does not amount to anything more than a mere knowledge, and which is rightly described by James in v. 26 as without spirit and therefore dead. . . . The *pistis* to which he and the rest of the New Testament refer in their positive statements is as such *energoumene*. It is, in fact, a definite act.

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 766.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 769.

> And generally speaking, it is the whole life-act of the Christian as seen from a particular standpoint.[1]

The analysis of faith thus far confirms our interpretation of the doctrine of the law as the form of the gospel and the conclusions for ethics which we hold follow from it. In Barth's view there is a coincidence between the cognition of the divine will and the whole-hearted consent to it. We have only then to reiterate that the conception of obligation is incapable of representing this coincidence, implying as it does that man may know what is required and yet disobey.

There is a passage in Barth's treatment of faith which is exactly parallel to the charge which we are making against his use of the concept of obligation. It occurs in a section in which Barth considers the traditional definition of faith as notitia, assensus, and fiducia.

> It is to be feared that when our older dogmaticians found the beginning of faith in notitia they were thinking of an abstract knowledge of all kinds of truths of faith as formulated in the Bible or dogmatics, the sort of knowledge which a man may amass and enjoy without its having any further relevance to him. They then thought it necessary to proceed to the assensus in which a man decides to accept these truths for himself, to make them his own, until finally he attains to fiducia in them and penetrates to their true meaning and flavor. We have seen why this is impossible from the very outset. In all the so-called truths of faith we have to do with the being and activity of the living God towards us, with Jesus Christ Himself, whom faith cannot encounter with a basic neutrality but only in the decision of obedience. The idea of an abstract knowledge of this object—we might almost say the idea of a theologian abstracted from the fact that he is a Christian—is one which has no substance.[2]

In this passage Barth has stated in another connection our reason for calling into question the concept of obligation. This concept too implies a neutral knowledge of the divine command and a decision beyond this knowledge to determine whether man is positively or negatively related to it, obedient or disobedient.

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[1] IV/2, p. 731.

[2] IV/1, p. 765.

The second point of our analysis of faith has to do with the manner in which this act of faith may be spoken of as free. According to Barth it certainly is a free human act, "more genuinely free than any other."[1] It does not exclude human emotion and volition. In it man does not choose against his desires or act against his will but in concert with them. Faith is the act of his heart. In it man does the thing which is self-evident.[2] This self-evidence presumably means that decision corresponds not only to its object but also to man's self-understanding. What is required is not something strange.[3] It is consistent with the believer's knowledge of himself and his world. The act of faith is a free act because it is the act of his own practical reason. On the other hand there is a sense in which faith is not free, according to Barth. Faith is not free if what is meant is that man has a choice between faith and unbelief. The mere possibility of faith is not even a possibility. The awakening of the Holy Spirit makes faith not only a possibility but an actuality and a necessity.[4] The basis of man's free choice is his being chosen. But freedom does not consist in a choice between the alternatives of faith and unbelief.

> The whole idea of a possibility of faith confronted by that of unbelief, the whole conception of man as a Hercules at the crossroads able to choose between faith and sin (and therefore unbelief), is a pure illusion. . . . It is not for man to choose first whether he

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[1] IV/1, p. 744.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 748.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 746.

> himself will decide (what an illusion!) for faith or for unbelief. Faith makes the solid actuality of unbelief an impossibility. It sweeps it away. It replaces it by itself.[1]

Our contention is that precisely this conception of freedom, of Hercules at the crossroads, is presupposed in the idea of obligation.

It is tempting to leave the analysis here, claiming only that Barth's conceptual scheme is not as good as the theological and ethical content. As far as it goes, that is true. But there is more to it than that. Already we have raised the question whether the faults which we find in the conceptual scheme are not rooted in the theology itself. (Cf. above, p. 84.) The very points which we call inconsistencies in the scheme of obligation--inconsistent with important themes in Barth's own theology--are insisted upon, apparently because they serve what is for him an essential theological purpose. It is not just a matter then of a form which is unsuitable to the content. The inconsistency which we find in the conceptual scheme corresponds to an inconsistency in the theological content. For our part it represents a refusal by Barth to follow his own best insights to their conclusion. We have argued that the concept of obligation implies a notion of freedom which is precisely the "Hercules at the crossroads" idea that Barth rejects. But does Barth reject it? The answer is that he does and he does not. He does, but not decisively and conclusively. He does when it suits his purpose, but he has purposes which it does not suit. Consider the following passage:

> Demanding my obedience to Jesus Christ, it assumes that I belong to Jesus. It does not, therefore, give me the choice between obedience and disobedience as if they were two possibilities. The

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[1] Ibid., p. 746.

> disobedience which is open to me can only be utterly unnatural. There is the real possibility of obedience and the real impossibility of disobedience.[1]

It is possible in this passage to see how Barth hedges on his original assertion. First, disobedience is not a possibility. But then it is "open," though only as "utterly unnatural." Finally, it is a "real impossibility." It is no doubt possible to conduct a very profound inquiry into the nature of a "real impossibility" as Barth uses the term here. Our proposal, however, is that Barth is simply driven to double-talk in order to obscure the denial of his original assertion.

In spite of the fact that Barth wants to speak of the alternative to faith and obedience as impossible, he nevertheless allows for its actuality. It is the "impossibility of the sin of Adam."[2] Barth begins by denying a choice between obedience and disobedience, between faith and disbelief. As it develops, however, disobedience and disbelief are not absolutely excluded. They are merely unviable. And instead of there being no choice as between the two, it turns out that the fundamental ethical act consists precisely in the decision in face of this alternative.

> In our decision we cannot say both Yes and No, or simply say nothing at all. Where can we possibly escape when that decision is the eternal predestination, when it is our election, and therefore our only real possibility, over against which there can, of course, be the real impossibility of disobedience, but not a third course.[3]

Here it is not Hercules at the crossroads but rather the possibility of evading the crossroads which is denied. Instead of there being no option between Yes and No, there is no option but Yes or No. "No other command confronts us with this Either-Or."[1]

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[1] II/2, p. 610.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 611.

[3] *Ibid.*

One might be tempted to explain the inconsistency as follows. Notwithstanding all the rhetoric about sin's "impossibility," Barth has to take it into account. It is a pity, so the explanation might run, that Barth ever got himself into such a ridiculous position, but at least he has sense enough to retreat, even if it does present something of an awkward spectacle. But is such a retreat necessary for Barth in order to account for the actuality of sin? All Barth is logically committed to in the position from which he retreats is the view that moral agency does not consist in a choice between faith and sin. The Word of God makes sin and disobedience impossible, but this is because hearing the Word itself already involves faith and obedience. Barth need not hold that sin is impossible as such. It is impossible to one who hears the Word of God, just as faith and obedience are impossible to one who does not. The essential point in the theory of the law as the form of the gospel and of Barth's explanation of faith is the rejection of the view that man can decide between faith and disbelief, between obedience and disobedience. Neither obedience nor disobedience is impossible as such. It is only the decision between the two as a sheer exercise of human volition from some neutral position which is impossible. And because such a decision is impossible, the analysis of moral agency in terms of obedience and disobedience is misleading.

It should be apparent that Barth retains the choice between obedience and disobedience which he purports to reject. The question is why does he? Our suggestion here is that he does so because it is necessary in order to assert the guilt of the sinner. In what sense could the sinner who does not freely choose disobedience be said to be liable for his act? The notion of freedom as choice between obedience and disobedience can be decisively rejected only at the expense of foregoing the judgment of guilt upon the sinner—a price that Barth is not at all prepared to pay.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 611.

Barth's treatment of sin in IV/1 is characterized by the emphasis upon the total and inexcusable guilt of the sinner. Man's existence as a sinner is one which is in contradiction to God (and therefore to his neighbor and himself) and for which he himself is responsible.

> Debt or guilt (opheilama, debitum) is the repudiation of an obligation, the failure to keep a promise, in which the offending party does an injury to the one to whom he is pledged, disturbing the relationship between them. The debtor is responsible both for his failure and repudiation, and also for the injury which is done to the other and the consequent disturbance in their mutual relationship. The sin of human pride in the relationship of man with God is a failure and repudiation of this kind, and as such it is the guilt or debt of man.[1]

The essential factors in Barth's description of the guilt of the sinner are first that the sin is an offense against God and second that the man is liable for the offense so that it is blameworthy. The existence of the sinner is not only faulty but the sinner is at fault—responsible for his faulty condition and therefore to blame. All of Barth's criticisms of other positions on sin are ultimately based upon one point: they mitigate the guilt of the sinner.

The remarkable thing about Barth's account of the guilt of the sinner is that he insists upon it despite the fact that he cannot grant its presuppositions. The description of the guilt of the sinner is common enough in theological formulations; Barth's position is not at all unique in this respect. The problem is that Barth's distinctive position on the law as the form of the gospel does not allow him the presuppositions requisite to the traditional view of man's guilt. These presuppositions are that man has a knowledge of the divine law and the freedom to obey or disobey. In exercising his freedom wrongly, in transgression of the law which has a valid claim upon man, the sinner incurs guilt. Barth's problem is that he cannot concur in this analysis. He precludes the possibility of any such neutral knowledge of God's law or a neutral freedom to obey or disobey. The knowledge of God's law is not a natural capacity of man. Nor can there be any separation between the knowledge of God's law and the knowledge of his grace. The knowledge of the law of God is a matter of his revelation, of the one Word of God which is both gospel and law. The law is the form of the gospel, and Barth's introduction to the section on sin is entirely consistent with this position when he argues that the knowledge of sin is not independent of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. It consists neither in natural, rational knowledge of the law nor in a general revelation independent of God's grace. To say otherwise is to presuppose a division in the knowledge of the Word of God, which Barth rejects.[1] But to say that the knowledge of the Word of God—the law—is a matter of revelation, of grace, and of the gospel is also to say that it is a matter of faith. There is no knowledge of God's law from a neutral position. Here then is the problem. Sin is transgression of the divine law. Its character as guilt and as deserving blame requires that it is a knowing and willful (free) transgression of the law. The knowledge of the divine law, since it is a matter of revelation and of grace, must therefore be the knowledge of faith, i.e., not a neutral and free knowledge but a committed and ethically determined knowledge. In what sense then can transgression derive from this knowledge, since it is the knowledge of faith? To state the problem in its starkest form, for Barth sin, interpreted as guilt, presupposes faith. It is so because guilt requires the knowing transgression of the law, but the knowledge equals faith, since the law is the form of the gospel. Barth is aware of the difficulty.

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[1] IV/1, p. 484.

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[1] Ibid., p. 363.

> What kind of a freedom which on the one hand is a freedom for God and obedience to Him, and on the other a freedom for nothingness and disobedience to God! Turn it how we will, if we regard this as a possibility of the creaturely nature of man, we shall always find it excusable because it is grounded in man as such. But in the final meaning of the term it is inexcusable. It has no basis. It has, therefore, no possibility—we cannot escape this difficult formula—except that of the absolutely impossible. How else can we describe that which is intrinsically absurd but by a formula which is logically absurd?[1]

There may be something originally attractive about the notion that it is fitting to describe a factual absurdity by means of a logically absurd formula, but we suspect on second thought this attempt to make a virtue out of a logical absurdity is entirely specious. Does not Barth himself exhibit some qualms about his "difficult formula," and does it not ultimately resolve itself into a pure deus ex machina? The failure to maintain the distinction between a theory of the absurd—if that is what sin is—and an absurd theory is to open a veritable Pandora's box.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 409-10.

The fundamental problem is that Barth's view of sin makes havoc of his view of faith. Faith, as we have seen, is an inclusive term for both the cognition of God and the ethical determination of one's existence and conduct. And these two aspects are said to be inseparable. The idea of sin as a knowing transgression contradicts this unity of faith, insofar as the knowledge of the law is said to be the knowledge of faith. It is revealing in this respect that Barth treats the fundamental form of sin as pride. He admits that all sin is basically unbelief. All disobedience and transgression spring from "the bitter root of unbelief."[1] But this basic definition, Barth says, needs to be made more concrete, and for this purpose he turns to the category of pride.[2] Perhaps, however, Barth finds it particularly convenient to speak of the primal sin in terms of pride rather than unbelief for other reasons as well. In the case of pride it is far easier to speak of sin as a knowing and willful act deserving blame. To involve guilt the sin must involve knowledge, and in Barth's case the knowledge of faith, since there is no other knowledge of God. But it is awkward, to say the least, to speak of sin as unbelief, if sin is supposed to involve culpability and therefore knowledge, and therefore faith. The definition of sin as unbelief serves to keep before us the embarrassing fact that sin seems to presuppose faith. Secondly, Barth wishes to stress the willful perversity of, and the personal responsibility for, sin. Can it be that he chooses to speak in terms of pride rather than unbelief because it would be uncomfortable to speak of the choice between faith and unbelief as within the free choice of man, a position he roundly condemns?

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[1] Ibid., p. 414.

[2] Another category in Barth's analysis of sin is "sloth." The point I am making applies equally well to it.

In spite of the fact that Barth refuses the definition of freedom as the capacity for choice between obedience and disobedience, such freedom is the presupposition of the concept of obligation and also of the notion of guilt. It appears then that Barth retains obligation even though it contradicts the best insights of his theory of the law as the form of the gospel because he is unwilling to sacrifice the ideas of guilt and blame for sin. In his discussion of man's culpability he cannot avoid speaking of this freedom. No one has to be Adam. "We are so freely and on our own responsibility."[1] Who are Adam's successors?: "those whose free will and commission and omission, whose actualisations of their good human nature, always follow the rule and perverted order which, according to the prophetic witness, is manifested at once at the very beginning of world-history . . ."[2] Judging from these statements, we may be pardoned if we conclude that the assertion about the absurdity of the formula for sin being necessitated by the absurdity of the actuality itself is in effect taken by Barth as a license to disregard and contradict previous statements whenever it suits his purpose.

We made the charge earlier (p. 83) that the idea of justification and sanctification as taking place "primarily and properly" in Jesus Christ actually threatens the possibility of a Christian ethics and tends not only to subordinate ethics to dogmatics but to substitute the latter for the former. In the concept of obligation and in the treatment of the guilt of sinner Barth goes to the other extreme. The tendency here is toward what might be termed "moralism," i.e., the view that man has a kind of neutral freedom to decide between obedience and disobedience, between faith and unbelief, and depending upon how he decides he deserves either praise or blame, justification or reprobation. (Of course, although Barth blames the sin he does not regard its opposite as meritorious. How one avoids this corollary is not at all clear.) In any case the question may be raised whether Barth does not in fact manage to err on both sides, his theory being at once too moralistic in respect of the analysis of sin and too unethical in respect of justification and sanctification.

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[1] Ibid., p. 509.

[2] Ibid., p. 510.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Does the conceptual form of responsibility offer a better scheme for construing the phenomenon of morality from a Christian point of view than does deontology? Our thesis is that Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with deontology rests upon solid grounds. It is true that his criticisms are not explicitly developed along the lines we have suggested. Furthermore, his treatment of the problem at times lends credence to Barth's defense of deontology, since Barth's reason for choosing obligation is for the sake of divine sovereignty and Niebuhr has trouble making his theory fit his intentions on this score. Nevertheless, the constructive merit of the theory of responsibility consists in the fact that it succeeds in overcoming the difficulties which we have found in Barth's theory. Responsibility is successful at the two points where the concept of obligation fails. First, it is capable of showing the coincidence between faith and ethics or between the cognitive and the ethical aspects of faith. And second, it succeeds in conceptualizing the coincidence between authority and freedom. We shall try to show in this chapter the contribution the theory of responsibility makes to these two problems.

The theory of responsibility allows Niebuhr to state one theme in Barth's own theological ethics more successfully than Barth himself does. That line is represented by the interpretation of the law as the form of the gospel and the interpretation of faith as a unitary response which itself includes the impulse determining man's existence and conduct. Our proposal is that on the matter of the coincidence of faith and ethics, i.e., the cognitive and the moral in faith, there is substantial agreement between Barth and Niebuhr. The difference is that as long as Barth holds to the idea of obligation his statements in behalf of this coincidence can amount only to lip service. The effect of the deontological scheme is to take back with the left hand everything given with the right. The extent of the agreement between Barth and Niebuhr can be seen at the point of the understanding of the relationship between the indicative and the imperative in each. In Barth the assertion that the Christian imperative (law) has its basis in an indicative (gospel) is simply another rendering of his theory of the law as the form of the gospel. The basis of the divine claim and the impulsion of man to conform to it have their basis in an indicative, a factual situation concerning what God has done for man disclosed in the gospel. The position of Niebuhr is very close. The assertion that interpretation determines a man's conduct can also be read as an imperative having its basis in an indicative. Is this not what is meant when human conduct in Niebuhr is described as a response to what one understands to be the factual situation with respect to God (whether or not the latter is explicitly theistic)? One difference is that in Niebuhr the indicative is determinative of human conduct both in the case of faith and disbelief. The imperative which the sinner obeys has its basis in an indicative quite as much as that of faith. He too is responding to God, but it is God the enemy. This is the indicative which is the source of his imperative. A second difference is that for

Niebuhr the imperative which has its basis in an indicative is not suitably described as an ought. The idea of ought, as we have argued, implies that it is not really the indicative which is determinative of conduct.[1] Ought includes the possibility of obedience or disobedience. A decision of the will is determinative. For Niebuhr there is no such separate movement of the will. The determination of the will is included in the apprehension (interpretation) of the factual situation (indicative). In other words the impulsion to conduct which is the response to the indicative is decisive. It is not the case that the indicative only presents one with a possibility which remains to be enacted by a decision of the will, as with an ought. Therefore it is an imperative only in the sense of an impulsion to act. The possibility of denying this impulsion, i.e., of being "disobedient," simply means that one is in fact responding to another indicative. It is to be explained not as a failure of will but as bad faith. Hence disobedience is a misleading and inappropriate concept. It may serve to indicate an unfitting response to the factual situation as understood in the Christian gospel, but it is misleading insofar as it implies that the agent himself understands the factual situation in this way but refuses by an act of will to be determined by it. Here is the separation of knowledge and moral agency which is repudiated by both Barth and Niebuhr. There is no knowledge of the gospel which admits of a refusal of acknowledgment by the will. Or more precisely, such a knowledge of the gospel which includes the possibility of not being determined by it is not what is meant by faith. It is only an external knowledge of words. True knowledge of the gospel is faith, and faith already includes the will. It is in this sense that "disobedience" is impossible. The theory of responsibility, however, recognizes that what is implied in the "impossibility" of disobedience is that the concept does not correspond to the reality. Barth, while recognizing the impossibility of accounting for "disobedience" theoretically, nevertheless assumes it to be a possibility in fact. So far as I can tell, this simply means that he does not take his own theory seriously. The "impossibility" of disobedience does not mean that unfitting conduct is impossible. It means that it is not to be understood as a negative response to reality rightly understood. It is a response to reality understood in another way. It is best seen not as a transgression but as a "fitting" response given a certain interpretation. It is objectively unfitting, but that it is so is a matter of false interpretation or bad faith and not merely a perverse will.

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[1] The question here is not whether an imperative can be logically derived from an indicative. It is whether the impulsion to conduct from an indicative is properly spoken of as an "ought."

Responsibility solves the problem of the coincidence of faith and ethics by the insistence that interpretation is determinative of conduct. By interpretation, as we found in Chapter I, Niebuhr means the response at the level of faith. The significance of the category is that it unites into one act what is otherwise divided as knowledge, will, and emotion. It is an act of the whole self and not simply of a part. Therefore, when Niebuhr identifies this act with faith and holds that it is itself determinative of conduct, he is explicitly refusing to allow that there is the possibility of a separation within faith so that knowledge may be present but the will lacking. It is this separation which is presupposed in the concept of obligation, as we tried to show in the foregoing chapter. For the theory of responsibility there is no volition separate from faith. The idea of an ought then is out of place, since it implies that the knowledge of what is the case and the fitting response still leaves one with the necessity of deciding to obey or disobey. According to the theory of responsibility, there is no such neutral knowledge from which decision could be made. Determination of the will coincides with knowledge in faith. It is possible to speak of religious knowledge of God separate from the determination of the will only by an abstraction. This indivisibility of knowledge and will in faith is the implication of the term "interpretation."

Interpretation implies cognition, but with a subjective element. There is implied a participation of the self in the act of knowing. The point is not that there is a subjective constituent in objects of knowledge. It is not objectivity in this sense which is denied. What is denied is the objectivity of the knowledge of faith in the sense that the self has such knowledge apart from a particular determination of the will. Cognition and volition are determined together in faith, and this is what is conveyed by the term "interpretation." The case can be made, of course,—and I have tried to make it in Chapter V—that Barth also rejects the objectivity of the knowledge of faith in the sense that cognition is determined independently of volition. But my point is that this is not the view implied in obligation. The advantage of the responsibility is that the conceptual scheme suits the content of the theory.

The second problem present in the theory of deontology is that of the relationship of freedom and authority. We do not intend to assert here that Niebuhr has explicitly solved this problem. What we do claim is that the theory of responsibility is stated so that the problem does not arise for it in the same troublesome way that it does in deontology. The problem in deontology arises because there are two rival concepts of freedom involved. On the one hand, it is claimed that the positive freedom of the individual consists in obedience. Disobedience is not the exercise of freedom, nor does it lead to freedom. This idea of freedom is the one expressly stated by Barth in the doctrine of the obligation as permission. However, implied in the theory of obligation is another concept of freedom which is incompatible with this notion. The idea of ought, as we have argued, presupposes a freedom consisting in the capacity to choose between obedience and disobedience. Although Barth explicitly disavows this latter definition of freedom, it is inevitably present as the presupposition of the conceptual scheme he employs. Barth's claim that the tension between authority and freedom is incapable of conceptual solution is based upon the definition of freedom in this latter sense. This in itself is evidence that he has not rid himself of this notion of freedom as the capacity for choice between alternatives. It is only this idea of freedom which is incapable of being reconciled with authority.

We developed the position earlier that Barth's notion of freedom is not that of a choice between the alternatives of obedience and disobedience. On the contrary, this notion of freedom is emphatically rejected. The sinner as such does not have this kind of freedom because he is in bondage to his sin. Neither is such freedom characteristic of faith. The man of faith as such is also in bondage, i.e., a bondage to Christ. To the extent that one has faith there is no possibility of disobedience. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that this idea of freedom is repudiated by Barth, it influences his theology because, as we have said, it is the presupposition of the concept of "ought."

The case of responsibility is quite different. Unlike Barth, Niebuhr has no stake in the definition of freedom as the choice between alternatives. When he criticizes deontology from the point of view of incompatibility with human freedom, it is not this kind of freedom which he is concerned to defend. If this is not clear in his criticism of obligation, it nevertheless becomes apparent in the development of the position of responsibility. And here is the crucial difference between the two positions. Responsibility is developed in such a manner that it does not include the idea of freedom as the choice between obedience and disobedience. The conceptual scheme does not presuppose a definition of freedom which the theory intends to reject.

The idea of freedom developed in the theory of responsibility is not that of a choice between alternatives. Since choice is dictated by one's interpretation, there is no such freedom within either the ethics of trust or the ethics of distrust. Freedom rather is identified with the unity and integrity of selfhood. Such freedom is possible only within the ethics of trust founded upon the interpretation of the One power in all the many as friendly rather than hostile. It is the response to this One which is the basis of the unity and the identity of selfhood. Without it the self is fragmented and divided against itself. There is indeed an inevitable response to the One power in all the many. But if this power is interpreted as the Enemy, then the response is necessarily a negative one--denial, repression, hostility—which has negative effects for the integrity of the self. Without the possibility of a positive response to the One, the self, which does not have the principle of its unity within it, is deprived of the true basis of its identity. The lack of a positive response to the One upon whom it is absolutely dependent, leaves the self with only a remnant of its identity. And since freedom is defined as the integration of selfhood which comes from a positive response to the unity lying outside the self, without such a positive response freedom is lacking. Freedom then is identified with the self which responds in trust and confidence rather than fear and despair. There is no freedom for such trust and confidence. That would imply a neutral freedom prior to the positive freedom which is the trust itself and the selfhood which results from it. Faith is a gift, the result of a conversion which the self does not itself effect. The self is not responsible for its faith. It is only responsible in faith.

We have pointed out that Barth's assumption of a contradiction between authority and freedom—at least a mutual limitation of each by the other, so that the more of one the less of the other—depends upon the definition of freedom as a choice between alternatives, a definition which Barth only partially succeeds in rejecting. It should be evident that the definition of freedom implied in the concept of responsibility avoids the conflict between divine authority and human freedom by rejecting this definition of freedom. Niebuhr's theory of the self which achieves identity and integrity only on the basis of the positive response to the Unity which lies outside the self succeeds in representing conceptually the relation between authority and freedom which Barth asserts but which he declares to be conceptually incomprehensible. Rather than a conflict between freedom and authority, the theory of responsibility represents the coincidence between the two which is claimed by Barth but which is incapable of representation because of the idea of freedom implied in deontology. The idea of freedom as the choice between alternatives is necessarily limited insofar as one course is claimed by authority. According to this scheme it necessarily follows that the more authority the less freedom. So long as one is within the framework of deontology the denial that this is in fact the relation between freedom and authority can amount only to an arbitrary assertion. In the case of responsibility, however, Niebuhr has defined freedom in such a way as to make authority the presupposition of human freedom rather than its limitation. This is not to deny that man is limited, but he is limited by having the principle of his own unity and selfhood in God and not in himself, i.e., by being absolutely dependent. But the limit of the authority outside man is not a restriction of any freedom man might have independent of this authority. On the contrary, the limit, the authority, is itself the presupposition of man's freedom (defined as identity and integrity), which man does not have in himself. This is not to deny that a similar analysis might be found in Barth to resolve the conflict between authority and freedom. In fact, in Chapter II we tried to show that Barth himself can solve the problem which he says is insoluble. To do so however, he has to get outside the framework of deontology.

We have argued that the solution to the problem of authority and freedom involves the rejection of the idea of freedom as consisting in a neutral capacity for choosing between obedience or disobedience. Insofar as freedom is defined in this manner an authority which claims one alternative necessarily limits freedom to that extent. The solution to the problem of the relation of freedom and authority requires a rejection of this understanding of freedom. The problem exists for Barth because he does not succeed in ridding his theory of this definition of freedom, first because it is the presupposition of the conceptual scheme of obligation but also because of his view of the guilt of the sinner. The problem does not exist for the theory of responsibility because, as we have suggested, it has no stake in the conception of freedom which is the source of the difficulty.

The fact that Niebuhr accepts the consequences of his consistent idea of freedom is indicated in the manner in which he deals with guilt. Niebuhr suggests that the idea of guilt is not a universal and necessary category of moral interpretation. On the contrary the interpretation of the condition of the sinner as one of guilt is peculiarly associated with the deontological point of view. The situation of the sinner is described as guilt only when sin is understood as transgression, as the willful defiance of a good law.[1] When sin is understood in some other way, e.g., as it is in teleology, then guilt is no longer the appropriate concept. "If the symbol of man-the-maker is consistently employed, the consequence of the first sin is understood as loss and confusion, rather than guilt."[2]

Niebuhr clearly regards the idea of guilt as dispensable. His position is consistent with his definition of freedom. Unlike Barth he does not explicitly reject one idea of freedom and then surreptitiously presuppose it as the basis of his description of the state of the sinner. The state of the sinner in Niebuhr is described as one of inner division and manifoldness.[1] It is a kind of anarchy within the self which derives from an interpretation of the One power (upon which unity and integrity of selfhood depends) as the Enemy. The root sin is unbelief, distrust. Pride and self-centeredness are consequences of the fact that one does not find the order for his life in God, since he is known only as the Enemy.

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[1] *The Responsible Self*, p. 129.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 133.

> I undertake then to find myself within myself and to order myself and my surrounding world by beginning with my own actions, regarding all other actions as reactions only to my own primal deeds.[2]

Self-will is not the primal sin for Niebuhr. Sin is not a defiant transgression or a willful rebellion but rather a pathetic compulsiveness and bondage, deriving from the lack of faith. Niebuhr should not be understood as attempting to exonerate the sinner--except of an inexplicable diabolical perversity. Exoneration, no less than blame, would leave the matter on the moralistic basis from which Niebuhr tries to remove it. Sin is evil in the sense that it is not a fitting response to God and in the sense that it is destructive of self and society. It is also personal evil in that there is no ego of the sinner which lies outside his sin. As personal evil it is subject to negative evaluation as falling short of fitting human existence and conduct. But it is not subject to blame as if man, having the power to do otherwise, from a position of freedom by sheer perversity of will decides upon rebellion and transgression. In the same way faithfulness can be evaluated as excellence in human existence and conduct. As such it might appropriately be described as virtue. It is not therefore meritorious, however, anymore than moral evil is blameworthy; for the faithful man cannot claim credit for his faith. He is responsible in faith but not for his faith.[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 138.

[2] Ibid.

It must be evident then how far Niebuhr's theory of responsibility differs from the way in which the term is popularly used. As commonly used responsibility means freedom to choose between good and evil and accountable for one's choice, i.e., deserving of praise or blame, reward or punishment. There is no such responsibility in Niebuhr. On the contrary understood thus, the term is simply a different name for the theory of deontology. In Niebuhr's theory responsibility means the power to respond fittingly to God. The difference is that given the capacity for such a response the actual fitting response necessarily ensues. The reason for the coincidence between the possible and the actual is obvious. The power of a fitting response to God is based upon a proper interpretation, viz., faith. Faith is the basis of the capacity for conduct which is fitting, and it would be very odd indeed to think of faith as a neutral capacity for right or wrong.

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[1] Niebuhr taught a course entitled "Faith as a Virtue" which raised eyebrows among some of his students who thought the idea conflicts with the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. Niebuhr apparently assumed that there is no conflict. The assumption presupposes the distinction between virtue as excellence in human existence and conduct and merit as deserving credit for one's excellence.

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